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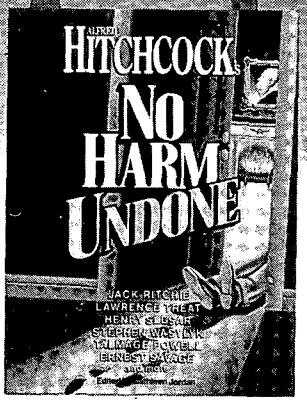

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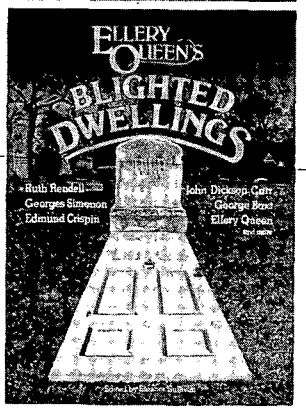

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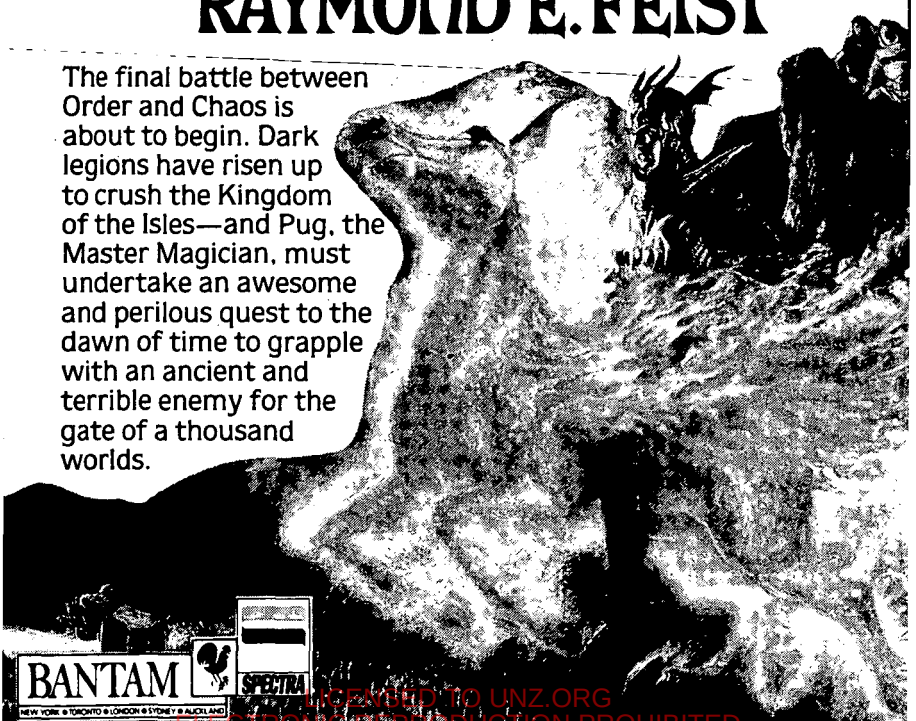

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

Harry had learned long ago that few things were as they seemed. The mill chimneys that dominated the skyline looked like great pillars of industrial might, but they were really, Harry knew, symbols of toil and poverty and hopelessness for most of their workers. He knew it because he had a sister who was a mill woman. Some of the mill women, like Delia Cotter, led double lives: the mill by day, the street by night, one supplementing the other. On the street, the women, like the chimneys, were deceptive images: objects of desire and lust to the men who used them, but in reality only hard-knock working women trying to keep it together for another night, another week, another Christmas. Silhouettes . . .

SILHOUETTES

by CLARK HOWARD

Margaret Clifford answered the telephone on the second ring. "Cliffords."

"Sergeant Sterling here, Mrs. Clifford. Sorry to bother you, ma'am. Is the constable in?"

"Oh, Sergeant, hello. As a matter of fact, no. He stepped down to the tobacco shop. I expect him back any moment. Shall I have him ring you?"

"Actually, I have to leave for a crime scene. I'm afraid we've had another slashing. I'll try to catch the constable at the tobacco shop, but if I don't, will you please tell him that we'll be in the alley just off the square, behind the Myrtle Cinema?"

Margaret put two fingers on her chin. "Oh, dear. So close. And with the shops open late for holiday shopping—"

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"Yes, ma'am. He's a bold one, all right. Well, I have to hurry."

"Of course." She added quickly, "Merry Christmas, Sergeant."

"Thanks, ma'am. Same to you."

There was a click and he was gone. Margaret hung up, expertly turned her wheelchair, and crossed the room, past the small, lighted Christmas tree, to a window that looked across the narrow street to a semidetached house identical to their own except reversed. As she suspected it would be, the parking port of the unit was empty, the tarmac glistening with damp under the streetlight.

Turning from the window, Margaret wheeled to a wall mirror purposely hung low to accommodate her. Shall I mention it again? she silently asked her reflection. Hasn't he enough on his mind already, with a mad slasher on the loose and his retirement being postponed because of it—a retirement, admittedly, that was looking bleaker all the time, so much of their life's savings having gone for the private specialists Harry insisted on getting for her? Specialists who kept saying, one after another, for fancy fees, that nothing could be done for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—portions of her spinal cord were hardening and degenerating, she was slowly wasting away, and that, simply put, was that? —Treatment? Well, assisted exercise to help maintain as much muscle tone as possible, and of course keep up a proper mental attitude toward the condition. Right.

Sighing, she decided not to tell Harry about the empty parking port across the way. It was just something a silly old crippled woman had noticed, anyway.

Hearing Harry's step outside, Margaret wheeled to the foyer and opened the door to meet him and tell him about Sergeant Sterling's call. His inscrutable expression did not change. "That makes nine," he said.

Margaret frowned. "I thought only eight."

"No, nine."

"The papers have been saying—"

"Never mind them. They're not counting the Scroggins woman because she was only strangled and not slashed. But I'm counting her. Nine."

"All right." Margaret shrugged. Harry turned to leave and she said, "Where's your tobacco?"

He paused. "They were out. It was a trip for nothing. I'll get a can at the Upton Lane shop tomorrow."

As he started out, Margaret suddenly blurted, "He's gone out

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again. After Sergeant Sterling's call, I looked over and the motorcycle was gone."

Harry knelt down and took her hands in his. "Do you realize, my Meg," he said gently, calling her what he had called her since the day forty years earlier when she had accepted his marriage proposal, "how many people are probably gone from their homes at this moment?"

"But, Harry, he's been out when six of the eight—"

"Nine."

"Six of the *nine* murders have occurred. And the *look* of the man, Harry—"

Margaret was talking about a neighbor named Lennie Stover. He had multicolored punk hair, wore a dangling earring, and rode a motorcycle—all serious offenses if Margaret were to judge. She was out of touch except for television and what she could see out the windows.

Harry patted her hands. "I'll look into it."

"I really wish you would."

"I will," he promised. "Now I've got to go. I'll be late, I expect."

"I expect," she agreed.

In the cobblestone alley behind the Myrtle Cinema, Harry Clifford found Edmund Sterling supervising the crime-scene activities that had been generated by the discovery of the body.

"Kids over there found her," Sterling said, bobbing his chin at a pair of twelve-year-olds talking to a policeman. "Playing chase. Tripped over her."

"You've got a bolo out, I imagine?"

"Yessir. First thing." A bolo was a Be On Look Out alarm: an all-local-points bulletin to alert patrol officers to be extra sensitive to suspicious persons.

"Let's have a look," Harry said.

Sterling lifted the sheet of opaque plastic that had been spread over the corpse. Harry looked down at a woman of perhaps twenty-five, bottle blonde, pink lipstick, green eyeshadow, winter coat open, blouse and bra pulled up, breasts hacked and bloody. "I've requested a man to print the body," Sterling said. That would be an attempt to find latent fingerprints of the killer on the victim's body: the flesh of the neck, face, hands, stomach.

"Probably won't get much in this dampness," Harry said.

"There's a locked Vauxhall down the alley there." Sterling bobbed

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his chin again. "She could have been working her johns in it. We're getting license information on it now."

"If it's hers, have it fumed," Harry instructed. Fuming meant that the vehicle's doors and windows would be sealed with tape and a timed-release canister left inside would expel Dermotine, a chemical often used in fast-drying glue, which would adhere to the amino acid left by any fingerprints on the interior. "Do we know who she is yet?" Harry asked.

Sterling shook his head. "Nothing in her purse but money. Fifty-one quid."

"Must've had a few customers already." Harry stepped out of the alley and looked around Manningham Lane. Facing the Myrtle Cinema across the way was a large Damart. "Let's talk to all the cashiers over there. Get the names of any customers they can recall going through the checkout counter tonight."

"Right."

Hunching his shoulders, Harry looked up and down the street. It was a street gone to seed, corroding like a neglected pipe. Even its Christmas decorations were cheap and tacky. "Manningham Lane used to be quite nice," he said, as much to himself as to Sterling. "I can remember when the people who lived around here were accountants and store managers and schoolteachers: people who wore clean clothes every day. All the businesses along here were reputable. Now look. Junk shops, betting shops, takeout-food shops, sex shops. And everyone you see on the streets is a struggling Asian, a West Indian black, or some Eastern European immigrant."

"Times change, sir," Sterling said quietly.

"They do," Harry agreed moodily. A sudden thought struck him. "Edmund, have we ever turned up anything at a slasher crime scene pertaining to a motorcycle? Tracks, oil drippings, anything like that?"

"Not that I know of," Sterling replied. An eagerness surfaced in his face. "Are you onto something, sir?"

"I don't think so," Harry disclaimed at once. "Just a remark one of my neighbors made," he lied. There. He had kept his promise to look into it.

"Do you suppose this latest one will affect your retirement again, sir?" Sterling asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Harry said. He was past the mandatory retirement age for law-enforcement officers by eighteen months, but three waivers had been granted by the Board of Civil Servants—one

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each after the last three slasher victims had been found—to let him continue on the job rather than hand the case over to a replacement. The truth was, Harry knew, no one else really wanted the case. "I rather imagine the chief will have a word with me about it in the morning," he told Sterling. "By half past nine, I should think."

He was within ten minutes of being exactly correct.

Chief Constable Grandy poured tea for Harry and himself. "Damn it, Harry, it makes me mad as hell that the gents upstairs want me to ask you to stay on again. You've earned your retirement—they ought let you take it. How's Margaret, by the way?"

"Doesn't seem any worse," Harry said. "I know she *is*. She just doesn't show it that much."

"God love her, she's taking it better than I would," Grandy said. "About staying on, you could always turn them down, you know. They can't make you stay on."

"I've been a policeman for forty-four years. Never refused an assignment yet. Anyway, I can use the money. Full salary's a great deal better than pension."

"Well, it's blasted cheeky of them to ask, anyway. Takes a lot of gall."

Harry nodded. He was certain Grandy had wholeheartedly supported the idea again, as he had in the past. Without Harry, Grandy himself would be the target of the negative publicity and the outrage on the part of the public. As it stood, Harry was the one who took the brunt, Harry who got called incompetent and inept.

"I thought," Grandy said, shaking his head wearily, "we'd seen the last of this sort of thing when we put Sutcliffe away. I thought the bloody Yorkshire Ripper would be the last fellow like that you and I would have to deal with. I obviously thought wrong." He paused a beat, then asked, "You'll stay on a while longer, then?"

"Certainly. Is there a chance of a bit more salary?"

"Let me see what I can do. You're at the top of your grade, but the board could establish a special category or something, I think—some kind of temporary thing. I'll see about it."

"Thanks."

Grandy scratched his chin. "Got anything on this latest?"

"Nothing immediate. We'll have some forensics later today. Autopsy's at noon."

"Are we pretty sure this is the same person?"

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"As sure as we can be on surface evidence only. The autopsy should confirm it for us."

Grandy shook his head. "Damn. This makes eight."

Nine, Harry thought. Nobody ever counted the Scroggins woman.

"Get me a written report as soon as you can," Grandy said.

"Right."

Harry went home at noon for a quick bite and to see how Margaret was doing. He found her at the window with an old pair of opera glasses, scrutinizing the Stover place across the way. "Shame on you," Harry teased, wheeling her chair around.

"He's not left his house all morning," she reported.

"Well, we certainly can't have that, can we? I'll get an arrest warrant at once."

"Go on, make light of me," she said as he pushed her into the kitchen. "If Lennie Stover turns out to be the Ripper, won't you feel the fool?"

"I will indeed."

Harry started to slice some ham and bread on the cutting block, but Margaret turned her chair around and took the knife out of his hand. "I'll do that. I've still got my arms left, you know."

"You've got a lot more left than your arms, my Meg," he said, bending to kiss her on the lips. Their eyes caught, he took the knife out of her hand and put it on the counter, and wheeled her into the bedroom. For the past ten years, since their fifties, they had found that making love in the daytime, prior to afternoon tea, was much more satisfying than at bedtime, when they were both tired. Now, despite the gradual wasting of Meg's body, they still enjoyed each other physically whenever the moment was right. They called their sessions "matinees." The pleasure derived by both of them was intense.

"It wasn't that good when we were thirty," Harry said.

"I know," Meg agreed. "It's probably psychological. Knowing I'm going and all."

"Probably." He got up and dressed. "Lie there and rest. I'll bring our tea and we'll eat off a tray."

An hour later, when Harry left the house, Lennie Stover crossed the street to meet him. " 'Scuse me. That your place there?"

"Yes."

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"My old woman tells me someone's spying on us from there with binoculars. Wha's going on?"

"That's just my wife," Harry said. "She's an invalid. But she's not spying—she's bird-watching."

"Bird-watching?"

"Yes. If she points the glasses toward your place, it's only because she's seen a bird set down somewhere: your porch, perhaps, or your chimney."

Lennie cocked his head sideways. "Bird-watching? That's all?"

"Yes. No harm meant if she's looking in your direction. It helps her pass the time, house-bound the way she is."

"Oh." Lennie squinted. "Me neighbor says you're a copper."

"Your neighbor's right."

"Well, then—" Lennie shrugged "—I guess it's all right. If it's only bird-watching, I mean. I'll tell my old woman it's all right."

"Fine. My wife will appreciate the understanding. Merry Christmas," Harry said as he got into his car.

"Same to you," Lennie Stover called after him.

Sergeant Sterling cleared his throat and said, "The victim's name is Delia Cotter. She was twenty-three, divorced, has a five-year-old son living with his grandmother in Leeds. At the time of her death she was dressed in the usual undergarments, a white blouse, short black jacket—the kind they call a 'bolero,' I think—and white slacks, fit very tight. She was definitely working the street, but wasn't a full-time prossie—had no pimp or even a boy friend as far as we've learned up to now. As a matter of fact, she had a regular job in one of the mills and apparently only worked the streets a couple of nights a week for the extra income."

"Pity she didn't pick another night," one of the other detectives remarked. He was one of fifteen men and five women who were in a police conference room for their first meeting on the latest victim. Two of the fifteen men were Harry and the forensic pathologist who had performed the autopsy on Delia Cotter. The other thirteen men and five women were detectives assigned permanently to the case until it was solved.

"The bolo we put out," Sterling continued, "turned up half a dozen unusually suspicious characters, all with violation sheets, that we've got in custody and will be checking out this afternoon. None of them look to be more than slightly suspect at this point, but we'll see." Sterling shuffled several sheets of paper he was holding. "The vic-

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tim's body was printed, with negative results. Even though the body was apparently discovered within minutes of the killing, the extreme dampness destroyed any prints that might have been on her. A Vauxhall van parked down the alley a ways was determined to belong to the victim and was fumed, also with pretty much negative results. Apparently the door had been opened and closed several times earlier in the evening, presumably to service customers, and enough damp air got in to neutralize any amino-acid traces from fresh prints. We've got a number of older prints that are in the tracer now, but unless our slasher was a previous customer we probably won't get anywhere in that direction.

"We have a list of Damart cashiers as well as Myrtle Cinema employees who were working last night, and we've begun compiling a list of customers known to have shopped at Damart or attended the film at the Myrtle last night. What our legwork in that direction will turn up remains to be seen." Sterling shuffled over his final sheet. "Physical evidence is almost nil. The alley was remarkably clean. We've a few wet fibers and photos of a footprint here and there on the wet cobblestone, but nothing promising. Our only really interesting find was an Excelsior cigarette butt next to the van. It was fairly dry despite the damp air, so we know it was reasonably fresh. The laboratory people are working on it now." Sterling looked at Harry. "That's it for me."

Harry nodded and said to the man sitting next to him, "Will you give us your post-mortem findings, Doctor?"

The forensic pathologist was a slight young man wearing large round eyeglasses and a blue lab coat. He was the subject of numerous necrophilia jokes among the policemen in the district, but Harry had found him to be an excellent autopsy technician and was pleased to have him assigned to all suspected Ripper victims.

"The main thing you're all interested in, I'm sure," the young doctor said as he rose, "is that the slash marks are identical to those on previous victims: right-handed slashes made with a thin knife-blade about four inches long. Five slashes this time, across the breasts as usual. So it's your man again, all right. Next, the vaginal smear was positive: traces of semen from both O and B blood types. Saliva test was also positive: traces of semen from an O type. So the victim had at least two customers, probably three, prior to being killed." He adjusted the glasses on his nose, then said, "Now for the most curious aspect of the findings, and one I suspect will add a new dimension to our scant profile of the killer: this victim's hyoid bone

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was fractured in two places. That is a condition which occurs only in cases of manual strangulation. This victim was choked to death before she was slashed. And based on the nearly pulverized sections of that bone where the killer's fingers constricted, I can tell you with a high degree of medical certainty that you are looking for a murderer with extraordinarily strong, extraordinarily powerful hands."

All of the police officers in the conference room looked surprised except Harry. He merely pursed his lips and nodded his head. Now, he thought, maybe they'd count the Scroggins woman.

When Harry left headquarters, he paused for a moment on the outside steps to tamp and light his bowlful of tobacco. From the top steps, he could look far down the street and in the distance see the massive black chimneys of the textile mills. Closer in was the angled intersection where Manningham Lane crossed, and already, though not quite dark yet, several prostitutes stood in half lighted doorways scrutinizing the curb-crawlers as they passed. The prossies, Harry noticed, were silhouetted in their grey doorways just as the mill chimneys were silhouetted against the grey sky.

Most things in life, he reflected, came down to silhouettes: shadowy outlines of what they really were, shadowgraphs. He had learned long ago that few things were as they seemed. The mill chimneys that dominated the skyline looked like great pillars of industrial might, but they were really, Harry knew, symbols of toil and poverty and hopelessness for most of their workers. He knew it because he had a sister who was a mill worker. Some of the mill women, like Delia Cotter, led double lives: the mill by day, the street by night, one supplementing the other. On the street, the women, like the chimneys, were deceptive images: objects of desire and lust to the men who used them, but in reality only hard-knock working women trying to keep it together for another night, another week, another Christmas. Silhouettes.

As Harry was standing there, Chief Constable Grandy emerged from the building and said, "There you are, Harry. Good news. The board authorized an additional fifty pounds a week salary for you. That should help a bit."

"Yes, it will. Thanks very much, Chief."

"Catch that bloody ripper for us, Harry," the chief said, slapping him fondly on the back.

Harry fired up his old Zippo and put it to his tobacco as Grandy went on down the steps to his car. Several minutes later, Harry was

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in his own car, heading home to Margaret. It was a short drive. They lived just above Manningham Lane, having bought their semidetached in the days about which Harry had mused to Sergeant Sterling—back when everyone in the neighborhood wore clean clothes every day. Over the years, he and Margaret had seen the area go to seed: bikers and punkers and prostitutes moving in, property values going down, most of their original neighbors selling out and moving on to newer, cleaner, safer sections—something the Cliffords couldn't do because by then Margaret's malady had surfaced and Harry, obsessed with finding a cure for her, was using all their funds to consult one specialist after another. Now the money was all gone, Margaret was still dying, and they were stuck where they were, with only a now inadequate pension to look forward to because at some point after Margaret became ill Harry had stopped his own voluntary contributions to the retirement scheme. Only the waivers that allowed him to continue working kept them out of dire straits.

Arriving home, Harry pulled into his parking port and was locking the car when Lennie Stover came across the street, his pinkish-yellowish punk hair looking like spilled paint in the glow of the streetlamp. He handed Harry a plate covered with foil. "Me old woman sent these here Christmas cookies over," he said a touch self-consciously. "Fresh baked, they are. I fink you'll like 'em. She's handy with an oven, me old woman."

"Why, thank you," Harry said, pleasantly surprised. "How very kind of your missus. Please thank her for us."

As Lennie stood there, he slipped a box of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lighted one. Harry's trained eye at once noticed the brand. Excelsiors.

"Well, take care," Lennie said, and gave Harry a two-fingered salute, then hurried away. Harry watched him go, thinking he dared not tell Meg about Lennie's Excelsiors and the Excelsior butt found near the Vauxhall. That little bit of information would be too much for her.

Harry went into the house and found Margaret putting previously cooked kidney pies, their supper, into the oven to warm. She was astounded by the cookies. "You don't suppose he's trying to poison me, do you? Because he suspects I'm onto him?"

"That's a possibility," Harry allowed in mock seriousness. "You'd best leave them all for me. If I die, give Sterling a ring and—"

"Oh, just shut up, will you? I swear, I don't see how you've remained a policeman so long, disregarding clues the way you do. Go

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on and pour our whiskys. If your closed mind can remember where the glasses are."

In their younger days, Margaret had sipped soda water in the evenings when Harry had his whisky, but since her illness had surfaced she had taken to sharing his Scotch with him and found she enjoyed it as much as he did. She now wished she had done it years sooner, just as she now wished many other things. She wished they hadn't decided not to have children. She wished she'd had the nerve to go through with her early suicide plan so that Harry wouldn't have spent all their savings on specialists. She wished her sister Emily hadn't married that Yank airman and moved to America. Emily had been as crazy about Harry Clifford as she was, back when they'd all been young. If Em was a spinster today, or even a widow, perhaps she could look after Harry when Margaret was gone. It grieved Margaret to think of him all alone. The one who died first, she had decided early on, really got the easier path.

As they sipped their whisky on the sofa together—Harry had swallowed emotionally when he lifted her over, she was so light—they listened to some old dance records on the phonograph and Harry opened the mail. It came early in the afternoon, but Margaret never opened it because Harry liked to do it. She opened letters from Em, of course, but that was all. The rest was mostly throwaway mail, anyway, only an occasional piece having any importance. Tonight there was a notice from the property-appraisal section of the inland tax department.

"Well," Harry said wryly, "our modest little dwelling is now worth approximately half what we've paid for it over the years. You can't say Harry Clifford doesn't know a wise investment when he sees it."

Margaret patted his knee. "Forget what it's worth in money, sweet—remember what it's worth in memories."

Harry smiled at her. "You're right. The bloody appraisers can't devalue that, can they?"

When they finished their drinks, they ate off trays in the living room and watched television for a bit, then Harry put Margaret back in her chair and they went into the kitchen, where Harry washed the dishes and Margaret dried.

"I've agreed to postpone my retirement again," he said as he put away the last dish. "And the board's upping me fifty a week."

"My, that'll help out nicely," Margaret said, pleased. She bit her lower lip for a second. "I know I shouldn't say it, but this Ripper

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fellow has actually done us a good turn, hasn't he? Financially, I mean."

"Yes. Yes, he has."

The plate of cookies from Lennie Stover was on the table.

"He'd have no way of knowing that, would he? If it was him, I mean. Him across the way."

"Of course not. He knows nothing about us. Except what he's heard. We only just spoke for the first time today."

They both looked at the cookies, but neither took one.

"Perhaps I'll stop spying on him," Margaret said.

"You don't have to if it helps you pass the time. I told him you were bird-watching."

"You didn't!"

"I did." Harry bent and kissed her. "Be a dear and every now and then scan their roof and the trees so I don't look like a liar." Turning her chair around, he pushed her toward the bedroom. "Time for your exercises."

"Oh, Harry, no, I hate them."

"They'll be done before you know it."

Attached to one bedroom wall was a metal exercise frame, on hinges, that opened out like a door, locked in place, and over which several pulley ropes traversed through ballbearing tracks that likewise were hinged and snapped up into place. On one side of the frame, Harry placed an inflated air mattress for Margaret to lie on while he gently buckled her ankles into padded cuffs on one end of the pulley ropes. On the other end, on the opposite side of the frame, were stirrup handles by the pulling of which Harry raised and lowered each of Margaret's atrophying legs one hundred times each night.

In the middle of their routine, the telephone rang. "Damn," Harry said. Before he went to answer it, he spread a light cover over Margaret so she wouldn't get a chill. When he returned several minutes later, he said, "It was Sterling."

Margaret's eyes widened. "There's not been another—?"

"No," Harry said, removing the cover he had placed over her and putting his hands back in the stirrup handles. "He just had a question. Nothing important."

"I should have known there wasn't another slasher victim," Margaret remarked. "You're never at home when Sergeant Sterling telephones about that. Always down at the tobacco shop or somewhere."

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"Out of the house, you mean. Like Lennie Stover."

"Oh, you," she chided. "You do think me silly, don't you? Go on start pulling—let's get this damned business done with."

"Right, my Meg."

Harry resumed the exercise routine, almost effortlessly, witl hands that had become extraordinarily strong, extraordinarily pow erful, in the nearly two years he had been working the pulley ropes

"Q"

ON OUR COVER

Memphis-born Cybill Shepherd has won acclaim as a model (Mode of the Year), a singer (four albums, including one with Stan Getz) and actress. Her moving debut in *The Last Picture Show* led t starring roles in *The Heartbreak Kid, Daisy Miller, At Long Las Love,* etc., and her movies made for TV include *The Long Hot Sum mer.* She is a nutrition and physical-fitness enthusiast and activ in many public-spirited causes.

Bruce Willis studied acting first with Jerry Rockwood at Montclai (New Jersey) State College, then with Stella Adler in New York His Off-Broadway credits include Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love.* Hi television performances include a guest spot in a *Miami Vice* episod and a dual role in the premiere episode of *Twilight Zone* written b Harlan Ellison. His first feature film was Blake Edwards' *Blind Date* and he will next star as Tom Mix in Edwards' upcoming *Sunset* In 1987, Willis recorded his first album, *The Return of Bruno,* fo Motown Records.

Together Cybill Shepherd and Bruce Willis have been charming television viewers as Maddie Hayes and David Addison on *Moon lighting* since it first aired on ABC on March 3, 1985. Both hav won Golden Globe Awards and People's Choice Awards, and in ad dition Ms. Shepherd has won the Star of the Eighties Award fron the Hollywood Press Club (1986) and Mr. Willis was named Inter national Broadcasting Man of the Year by the Hollywood Radio an Television Society (1987).

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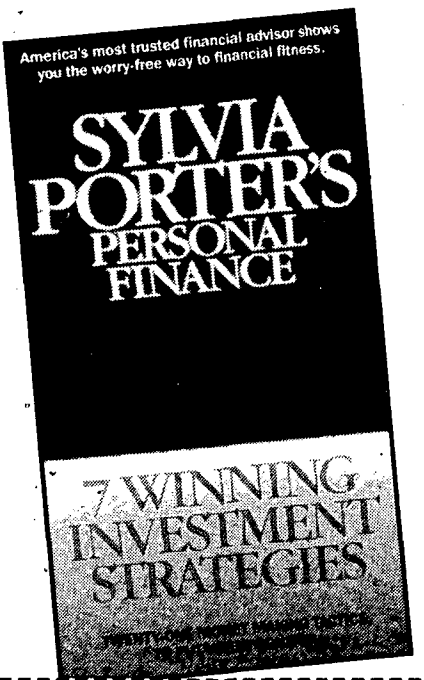
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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

"Do you get the feeling you're being watched?" Astrid asked her husband. "Don't turn around. She's not behind you. She was, but then she spoke to the waiter and he moved her to a table across from us."

"Maybe she felt a draft."

"No, I tell you she keeps staring at you. Quick, look—she's not watching."

An intriguing story with a dreamlike quality from one of the mystery genre's most vigorous and versatile short-story writers . . .

BIG SISTER

by DONALD OLSON

Beyond the window, the indecisive rain which had been falling on and off throughout the day gradually evaporated into an autumn mist, smothering the plane trees in the park and dripping beadlike tears from the awning on the heads of passersby. Astrid felt warmly enclosed in the dimly lighted coziness of the Italian restaurant, with its flame-colored tablecloths and fat little candles in ruby-glass chimneys. They dined there at least once a week—the place was only a short stroll across the park from the narrow ochre-brick house where they occupied the first two floors.

The rigatoni had just arrived, steaming and aromatic with Giulio's intemperate spices. John refilled Astrid's wine glass as her eyes strayed discreetly past the table off to their left where a woman in black sat alone.

"Do you get the feeling you're being watched?" she asked her husband. "Don't turn around. She's not behind you. She was, but then she spoke to the waiter and he moved her to a table across from us."

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"Maybe she felt a draft."

"No, I tell you she keeps staring at you. Quick, look—she's not watching."

Between the heads of two children lapping up spaghetti, John caught a glimpse of the woman. She was perhaps in her fifties, plump-faced, her greying hair cut in bangs across her forehead, the rest cut short and rolled into fat little sausage-curls.

"She looks like somebody's mother," said John.

"You don't know her?"

"No, do you?"

"No."

"Bewitched by my looks, no doubt." He could say such things without vanity, precisely because he took his good looks for granted: the lean face and floppy blond hair and wide-set light-grey eyes below brows that were almost black.

"Frankly, she's making me nervous," said Astrid. "She's so obvious about it."

"I'm sure she's merely keeping her eyes on the street to see if it's stopped raining."

Astrid tried to ignore the woman's presence and prompted John to tell her again about the Westchester mansion that was *almost* in the bag—the commission that would insure the trip to Spain they'd been planning with such hope. As he talked, she thought of the picture she wanted to paint—a dreamer's vision of the park in just such an atmosphere as it now wore.

They ended the meal with spumoni and Giulio's thick, rich coffee. Astrid excused herself and wove her way among the tables to the ladies room. She was powdering her nose when the woman in black entered soundlessly, stepped to the wash basin beside Astrid, and daintily rinsed her pale, plump fingers, upon one of which shone a large sardonyx cameo. Astrid found the woman's proximity unnerving and was aware of an equally irrational fear that those shapeless, scarlet lips would open and utter something outrageous.

When the lips did part, the woman's plum-colored eyes seeking contact with Astrid's in the mirror, all that came out was: "He's very handsome, your young man."

Astrid smiled absently.

"Is he your husband?"

"Yes."

"Out there, I couldn't help staring. Most impolite. Do forgive me."

Astrid turned to leave, only to be stopped by the soft grip of damp

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fingers on her wrist. "You see, he bears such a striking resemblance to someone I once knew. It's truly uncanny. Please tell me his name."

Astrid drew her hand away but felt trapped by the entreaty in those liquid eyes. "It's John. John Creighton."

"Oh?" More than a hint of disbelief. "I could have sworn—"

"Excuse me," murmured Astrid, brushing past her.

She told John what the woman had said. "Don't ask me why anyone so inoffensive-looking should give me the willies, but she did. Are you ready to leave?"

They walked back across the park in a half rain-half mist and were climbing the steps to the house when Astrid glanced back. Her hand tightened on John's arm.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. I thought for a minute—" But she didn't look back again, preferring to believe she was mistaken, that it wasn't the same woman at all.

It wasn't really chilly enough for a fire, but Astrid asked John to light one. Could she be catching cold? He then sat down with his book and she took up her needlepoint—she was making covers for the Victorian lady's chair she'd inherited from her aunt, the same pattern as the original tapestry on a black ground. The logs spat and crackled. The cat, fat as a pumpkin and the same color, curled up beside her on the Empire loveseat.

As the clock chimed ten, Astrid rose and went to the window, parting the saffron-brocade curtains to peer out. The mist had thickened; the streetlight gleamed feebly through webs of luminous gauze, like eyes dimmed by filmy cataracts. Astrid's fingers tightened on the curtain.

"John! She's out there!"

"Who is?"

"That woman. On the corner, under the light. Looking at the house."

"Nonsense."

"Well, come and look for yourself."

Grudgingly, or so she sensed, he crossed to the window. "So? She's probably waiting for a bus."

Astrid looked at him strangely. "Buses don't go by here. You know that."

"A taxi . . . ?"

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She was working on the picture when the phone rang the following morning.

"Mrs. Creighton?"

"Yes."

"It's Francesca."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm the woman who spoke to you in the restaurant last night. You remember."

"Oh. Oh, yes." An identical chill to the one she'd felt in the powder room last night prickled along her spine.

"Forgive me, but I had to call. I couldn't sleep. Please don't think it impertinent, but could I please come see you? Really, if it wasn't terribly important I wouldn't presume. May I, please?"

"If you could tell me why, Mrs.—?"

"Dolloff. Miss Dolloff. Francesca. It's about him, you see. Please don't think me mad or foolish, but I must talk to you. He's not there, is he?"

How could she refuse? She had never been one to have a plausible excuse on the tip of her tongue. She invited the woman to stop by for tea about four. John wouldn't be home before six.

In the drab light of a cloudy day she looked dowdier than in the restaurant's flattering ambience, a faded magenta raincoat over the same black dress, shabby black pumps, the sallow face indifferently made up. Astrid was less aware of all that than of the weight of concern visible in the shrouded, plum-colored eyes.

"Oh, what a divine room. I'm crazy about antiques. And the cat! What an adorable monster! I do love pussycats." This bubbled forth as if with the intent to establish a disarming air of social camaraderie, even while Miss Dolloff's eyes betrayed some deep anxiety that created quite the opposite effect.

Astrid fussed with the tea things, unable to explain, unless psychically, her own feeling of tense expectancy.

"Now then, Miss Dolloff—"

"Please call me Francesca. It was such a shock to walk into that restaurant and find him sitting there—all grown up, but looking absolutely the same to me. Well, I say grown up. He was fourteen when I last saw him, that terrible, terrible day. And now he must be thirty-four."

"He didn't recognize you," said Astrid, alarmed that the woman had guessed John's age.

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"Is it any surprise?" The woman's hand strayed to the greying bangs at her forehead. "I'm sure I've changed considerably."

"Perhaps if you told me why you think you know John."

"He's my brother, that's why. My little brother."

"*John* is your brother?" The woman had to be mad.

"My brother's name is Charles. But what does that signify? He disappeared twenty years ago—vanished, poof, like that! I did my best to find him, employed every means, but to no avail. Isn't life extraordinary? That after all my efforts we should meet by pure chance?"

I must humor her, thought Astrid, discerning a repressed hysteria behind those giveaway eyes. Calmly, she inquired where Miss Dolloff's brother had vanished from.

"Boston. We lived in Boston." She sipped her tea delicately, rather like the adorable monster lapped his milk, with rapid ducking motions of her head toward the cup.

"Under what circumstances did he disappear?"

Miss Dolloff ventured a slyly confidential smile. "You've a right to know, of course. But you must promise not to let on to him I told you, or even that I was here. That might be a grave mistake."

Astrid nodded, willing to promise anything to hasten the visit's end, and Francesca proceeded.

"The death of our parents in a motor accident when Charles was ten upset him terribly. I was older, I could handle it. I became both sister and mother to Charles. Perhaps I failed to understand the depth of his need for me until I met a man and fell hopelessly in love with him. I was thirty-four and had never had any experience with men before. I thought he wanted to marry me—I was quite pretty then—and I let him do what he wanted. Which was all that he wanted, I soon discovered. Charles came home from school one day and walked in on us.

"You're married—you know how a youngster might easily misinterpret 'the tender ferocities of *l'amour*,' as someone has called it. He thought I was being attacked. He picked up a bronze doorstop and bashed the poor man over the head. I was horrified. All that blood. Fortunately, the injuries weren't all that severe as it turned out, but I turned on Charles in my horror and my shame. 'You've killed him!' I screamed. 'You wicked, wicked boy, you've murdered him!' Charles fled from the house. The man agreed not to make trouble—I think now he was glad of an excuse to get rid of me.

"When I got home from the hospital, Charles wasn't there. He

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never did come home. The police tried to find him. I did all I could, but he was never found. He ran away thinking he had killed a man. I'm sure he must never have learned the truth or he would have come back to me. That's what I've had to live with all these years. —And then to walk into that restaurant and see him sitting there! I can't possibly describe how I felt."

The initial horror with which Astrid listened as the story was unfolded gradually changed to a sad conviction that Francesca Dolloff was to some degree mad—if becoming the victim of one's own guilty conscience could be called madness. Obsession, at the very least. "I'm sorry, Miss Dolloff," she said gently. "I'm sure it's been dreadful for you, but please be honest with me. Is my husband the first man you've ever encountered in all these years who you thought might be your brother?"

Tears poised on the woman's heavy eyelids, wobbled down her plump cheeks. "Oh, but this is different. This time I'm *certain* it's Charles."

"Because my husband looks to you the way your Charles looked twenty years ago, so much so you would instantly recognize him. Be reasonable. Your brother would have changed as much as you have."

"But that hair. We called it ice-cream hair. And the dark brows—"

"Unusual, yes, but not exceptional enough for you to—"

"He never talks about his family?"

"John has no family. He was an orphan."

"Pictures of him when he was young? You must have some."

"No. There was a fire in the flat where John lived before I met him. Almost all his possessions were destroyed. He's always lived in this city, never in Boston. He would have told me."

Francesca regarded her with bland scepticism. "I see. An orphan. And all his possessions destroyed."

Astrid abandoned any pretense of tea-table politeness. "You're implying my husband is a liar. Some sort of impostor."

"Not with any wicked intent. That wouldn't be like Charles at all. He was a good boy. So sensitive. You see, I've always had a theory about what happened to Charles, and now that I've met you I feel it's been proved, really I do. I think Charles must have blocked out what happened that day—mentally, you know. Perhaps he doesn't remember. But subconsciously he might always have been trying to come back to me, where he felt safe. And when he met you—please don't be insulted if I tell you that twenty years ago I looked very

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much like you. And you were older than Charles—that would have mattered."

Astrid had heard quite enough. "Miss Dolloff, you must realize how preposterous that sounds. John has no buried secrets. Take my word for it, I would know."

"Ah, we all have buried secrets, my dear."

"Look, if it will set your mind at rest I'll tell John your story. He can assure you himself."

"No! You mustn't tell *him!* I couldn't bear that on top of everything else. That he should hate me for letting him believe for a moment that he had killed a man—no, I couldn't bear that. And God knows what effect it might have on him. How he would react."

Her tears had dried. She looked around the quiet comfortable warm room. "He must be very happy here. He looked so happy last night. As happy as he was with me. You're just what Charles needed. Forgive me, but you must be what? Ten, twelve years older? Yes, that would be perfect." She stood up, adopting the face and manner of one about to depart from a pleasant, unexceptional tea party. "I can rest happy now, knowing Charles is alive and happy and well cared for. Thank you, my dear, for everything."

Astrid helped her into her coat. Rain was falling again, heavy and persistent out of the grey, stifling sky. "I'll call you a cab—"

"No, that's all right. My hotel's not far away. I'd rather walk. It's hardly a palace, the Parkview, but I'll soon be gone."

From the window, Astrid watched as Francesca Dolloff crossed the street into the park, a bowed, weary figure, seemingly oblivious of the rain, the fat little sausage curls drooping lifelessly now, like dead grey mice.

She had never felt so glad to welcome John home. He fairly burst in, spangled with rain but with the air of a man who had whistled all the way home. He kissed her and gave her a breath-stopping squeeze.

"Good news, big sister! I sold the Nordland house. I signed— Is something wrong, darling?"

"John, promise me you'll never, *ever* call me that again as long as you live."

"What? Big sister? I always call you that. Among other things."

"Never again, please. Not after what I went through today."

"That bad?"

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"That depressing. Get your coat off. I'll make you a drink and tell you all about it."

He listened attentively to her account of Francesca Dolloff's visit, but without the appearance of enthralled fascination she felt the story ought to have inspired. His expression remained vaguely preoccupied, as if not even so bizarre a tale could altogether distract his mind from the more pressing issue of the Nordland sale, the trip to Spain, the smell of pot roast emanating from the kitchen.

"Poor darling," he murmured when she reached the end of the dispiriting story. "The woman's mad, of course." He drained his glass. "Dinner ready, I hope. I'm ravenous."

"Not mad exactly," said Astrid, finding his perfunctory dismissal of the story rather disappointing. "Haunted." Yes, that was the word she'd been groping for since Francesca Dolloff had departed. A haunted woman. Could she catch that look on canvas, she wondered. It might be interesting to try.

At dinner they talked about the trip, and afterward John announced he had to go out again. Back to the office.

"Oh, must you?" she protested. "It's a beastly night."

"I want to go over that contract with a fine-tooth comb. I won't be long."

When he hadn't returned by nine, she began to fret. By eleven she was seriously worried. Why hadn't he at least called if he'd been held up? But then "held up" brought visions of his being mugged. She waited until midnight before calling John's boss, who hadn't seen or heard from him since that afternoon. Finally, she phoned the hospitals, and then the police. They suggested she wait until morning and if he hadn't come home by then to come down and file a missing-persons report. Their attitude seemed as perfunctory as John's had when she'd told him about her afternoon.

Presently, surrendering to an impulse she could no longer resist, she picked up the phone and called the hotel where Francesca Dolloff had said she was registered.

"Miss Dolloff checked out earlier this evening," she was told.

"Was she alone, do you recall?"

"I'm afraid I don't," the clerk said.

Astrid spent a sleepless night, alert for the sound of John's key in the door or the jangle of the phone. She felt a wreck the next morning, incapable of attacking the simplest household chore.

For hours she stood at the window, staring out across the park.

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It was another wet day. Watching the long tears of condensation dribble down the misty pane, she kept telling herself she must go down to the police station, yet she felt increasingly powerless to shake off a deadening inertia of mind and body.

Late in the afternoon, continuing to put off the trip downtown for fear that he would call or arrive while she was absent, she moved to her easel, took up a charcoal pencil, and proceeded to sketch from memory the disturbing features of Francesca Dolloff, scarcely conscious of refining away the most visible signs of aging. When she stepped back to study the result, the face she had sketched incited in her a feeling of dismay—almost of panic.

It might have been a self-portrait.

DETECTIVERSE

SILENT VERDICT

by HENRIETTE P. BATEMAN

With his great eyes wide open, the wise old owl
Saw 'neath the thick branches a murder most foul.
When Henry took aim at his wife who had chided
And glared at her whom he would shoot,
The owl sat in judgment, and then he decided
He really did not give a hoot.

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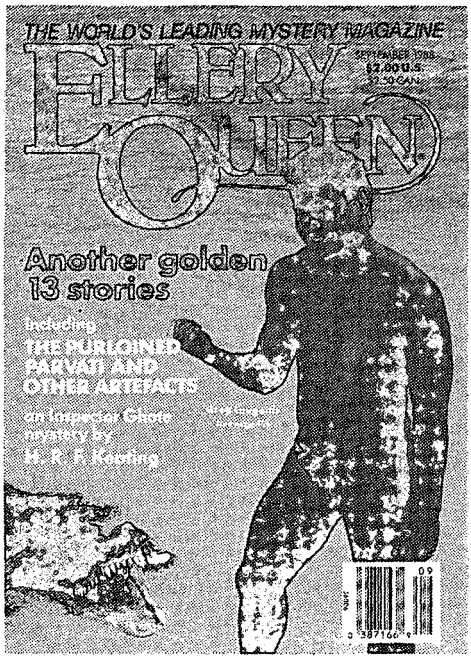

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a *NEW* short story by

J. W. WHITEHEAD

J. W. Whitehead began buying Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine *from his neighborhood drugstore when he was ten, and read his first Raymond Chandler novel a year later. Since he began publishing last year, his stories and reviews have appeared in such various publications as* Puerto del Sol, EQMM *(beginning with "A Quiet, Lonely Place," 11/87),* Modern Short Stories, The Wittenburg Door, and Sojourners. *His story, "The Sins of the Father," won the 1987 short-fiction award from* The Other Side. *Whitehead, 26, lives in Pennsylvania with his wife Kathryn. This third story from him in* EQMM *features a new man of the cloth to the mystery field, Reverend David Fielding . . .*

THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL

by J. W. WHITEHEAD

Rarely does the position of acolyte in our church require my active recruitment. When it does, I often have the devil of a time, if you'll pardon the expression, convincing the parents of the potential acolyte that it is worth the tumultuous struggle of raising their adolescent son or daughter from the tomb that is a Sunday-morning bed an extra half hour early. Young teenagers love their sleep, and it seems they love it best on the Sabbath.

But there are those times when parents are willing to volunteer their young man or woman for service. These apparently beneficent offerings are not always just so. I have found that the youth will approach his or her newfound responsibilities with all the anticipation and enthusiasm of the incarcerated, and this will be a quite natural response, for the parents have come to see the position of acolyte as a means to adolescent reform.

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This impression doubtless derives from the short, heretofore happy tale of Michael McClintock. Briefly summarized, Michael came to me several months ago with one foot already inside a particularly notorious military school. The McClintocks had vowed his next offense (which would be the latest in an embarrassingly long line that included, at age thirteen, auto theft, shoplifting, and vandalism) would be his last. But first they would see if a few months of acolytic devotion might not mold him into something new—or at the very least, something containable.

While I was dubious about the possible benefits Michael might take away, I was far from cowed by his record. My acolyte boot camp had broken more than one hardened recruit. But with each week of error-free, reverent service, it became more and more plain to me that Michael had one of the all-time schemes up his billowing white sleeve, or else had experienced an about-face akin to that of the tax collectors of the gospels. I did my best to think the best.

Months passed with no silver or gold vessels removed from the vestry, no wine secretly chugged in the kitchen, no obscene epithets scrawled in the thick crust of the communion bread. Then, one Sunday morning Michael announced, first to me, then to his parents, that he intended to enter the ministry. The redemptive power of the position of acolyte has not been underestimated in our church since.

Our most recent appointee to the post of acolyte was no more electrified on *his* first Sunday by the prospect of lighting candles and serving communicants than were any of his predecessors. In fact, I found him in the room behind the choir, sending Michael (a short, bushy-haired boy whose appearance gave no indication of the trouble he'd seen) into gales of unmistakably devious laughter.

The new boy's name was Daniel. Daniel's predilection for vice, for which he'd been sentenced to duty under my hand, had bypassed the usual early-adolescent vices—beer, cigarettes, pornography, Satanism—as well as the illegal ones once practiced by Michael, and taken instead an abnormally strong and mature hold upon that most tempting of adult vices: lust. Simply stated, Daniel had been discovered, in the flesh, at various times and in various places with a remarkable variety of teenaged girls, all of them older than himself.

Otherwise, Daniel was a somewhat dull boy, with plenty of jokes that he liked to let you know were on the tip of his tongue but that he wasn't about to share with you. His parents had told me he had an amazing voice—"the voice of an angel," his expansive, faintly

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desperate father had said. But they also told me he wouldn't use his talent and asked if I might concentrate on that reluctant area of his personality. Daniel was big for his age, and unjustly good-looking. Michael, who had really become a most conscientious and sincere boy, would have used Daniel's looks to much more meaningful advantage.

Walking into that back room that Sunday and seeing Michael's control as senior acolyte washed away in a deluge of Daniel's arch charm, assertiveness, and sheer size, I wondered how many weeks Daniel would grudgingly afford me my own authority. Michael saw me first and stifled a series of giggles that nonetheless continued to bubble up in his throat. Daniel stood before him, his back to me, rendering a hymn in a beautiful soprano with an unfortunate Philadelphian accent I recognized as the voice of my wife, who often solos with the church choir.

"Daniel," I said, and he turned, unsurprised, to look at me with an insolence I must confess left me unnerved for the briefest of moments.

"Mrs. Fielding, wasn't it?" I asked. "Well done. We'll have to get you singing in the choir."

For the moment he was stymied. "I can't sing," he said, looking embarrassed, perhaps for the first time in his life. He seemed to hate the experience, and me for providing it.

"All right, boys," I said, gathering them toward the door. "Let's get this show on the road."

A minister will be accused of many things during his term of service, but few if any of the accusations leveled at a minister will involve the police. The numbers, sadly, were not in my favor when I went to call on Margery Holmes and her sister-in-law Ethel some days after Daniel's first Sunday as an acolyte.

Margery and Ethel were two of our church's small but unified network of shut-ins. Too infirm to get out to church, they nonetheless gave their pledges tirelessly, and expected in return that the minister be as tireless in his visitation.

I did my best. They'd shared a house within a mile of the church ever since Margery's brother (and Ethel's husband), Lloyd Holmes, passed on some years ago. Their advanced age, somewhere in their late eighties or early nineties, was complicated by the fact that both were blind.

I had a standing invitation to visit them once a week, on Thursday

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morning, for tea and homemade cake. They ate cake all the time, all sorts of cake—some cakes small enough to be cupcakes or soft cookies, some large as wedding cakes. Some were almost the density of bread, others spongy enough to seem largely made of air. Margery and Ethel baked the cakes themselves, and each one was better than the last. They were likable old girls, without a minute's self-pity between them.

I was surprised that morning upon arriving at their house, a three-story pseudo-Victorian probably built thirty-five years too late to be authentic, to find that Margery and Ethel's front door was locked. They always left the door open for my visits, to save Margery the walk. (I'd never, in more than five years in the parish, seen Ethel on her feet, though secondary sources had assured me she was ambulatory.) I rang the doorbell and prayed there would be no grim discoveries ahead of me. My request, it turned out, would not be granted—but the grim discovery wouldn't be of the sort I feared.

The door was unlocked and opened and Margery stood across the threshold.

"Hello, Margery," I said.

"Reverend Fielding," she said, her eyes staring lazily over my left shoulder. "It *is* Reverend Fielding, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," I said. "I'm not late, am I?"

"No," she said. "You're right on time, as you usually are." She stood in the doorway, immovable, hands confrontationally on her hips. Her lack of vision didn't lessen the sense I had that she had struck a pose for me.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked her.

"Hadn't you better answer that?"

"Margery—"

"You'd better come in." She stepped aside to allow me into the foyer. "Ethel will want to hear this just as much as I do."

The house, as usual, smelled of fresh baking and stale upholstery. The walls were grey with neglect and the grime of years of baking. "Is Ethel well?" I asked, truly mystified.

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances," said Margery.

We went into the parlor, the walls of which were lined with shelves claustrophobically cluttered with two lifetimes' worth of knick-knacks and mementoes.

Ethel sat in her usual chair, at the ready. She said, "We have a soup-sized bone to pick with you, Reverend." She looked older, stock-

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ier, and even less self-involved than her sister-in-law. She was the one, during our conversations over the years, who had pinned me down on the ambiguous and controversial passages in the Scriptures. She "watched" the shows on television that tried real judicial cases in actual courts of law and took very personally the verdicts that contradicted her own.

"A bone to pick with me?" I said.

Margery nodded. By now she typically would have offered me tea and my choice among samples of a half dozen cakes, I would have offered tactfully and without reference to her disability to serve myself, and she would have resisted my offer and produced cake and tea enough to satisfy a full caucus of clergy. But today she seated herself in an afghan-padded rocker and fixed the air above my left shoulder with her angry, empty gaze. Ethel did not even bother to turn her head in my direction.

"Ladies," I said, "what's this all about?"

"Why don't you tell us?" said Ethel, to the far wall.

"Tell you what?"

"About yesterday," said Margery.

"*What* about yesterday, ladies?"

Margery turned toward her sister-in-law. "Ethel, do you think we could have been wr—"

"Wait, Marge dear," said Ethel. To the television she said, "Are you trying to tell us, Reverend Fielding, that you weren't in our house yesterday?"

"Yesterday? Of course not." I thought about that, and realized it could be misconstrued. "I wasn't here yesterday, no."

Margery said, "Then who was?"

Ethel said, "Honey, let me handle this. Reverend, you're a good man and you've been a friend for some years now, and so we would like to settle this right now, between the three of us."

"I'd be glad to help, Ethel," I said, "but I'm afraid you're referring to something I simply don't understand."

"Yesterday," said Margery, "around lunchtime, we heard a noise out on the porch, near the parlor window. I had a filbert torte in the oven and Ethel was trying a new recipe for chiffon cake—"

"Ruined," said Ethel, shaking her head, "all ruined."

"Then a knock came on the door. Now you know us—we simply don't have uninvited company. It doesn't do to entertain while things are in the oven or in a bowl, craving attention. Well, I went to the door, and Ethel went to her chair. Since you can't be too careful

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these days, I thought I'd better find out who it was first. I stooped down and through the mail slot I asked who was there. Imagine my surprise when it was *you*."

"But, Margery," I said, "it *wasn't* me."

"But it was, don't you see? It was your voice saying hello, it was you asking if you could come in. Naturally I did let you in, and we sat here in the parlor for a bit and talked, and that was all. You got up and saw yourself out."

"This is certainly the oddest thing I've ever heard of, ladies," I said. "I can assure you I was nowhere near this house yesterday. You mistook another man's voice for my own."

"Another man named Reverend Fielding?" said Ethel.

"Impossible," I said. "But even so, why are you so riled by what sounds like an innocuous visit?"

"The reason," Ethel informed me severely, "is because a few minutes after you left, we went to the silver set for the knife to cut into the filbert torte, and it was gone."

"The whole set," Margery accused, leaning forward in her chair.

"Is anything else gone?" I asked.

"You tell us," said Ethel. "There is nothing else we know of."

"Ladies," I said. "You can't think I've done this to you—particularly not to you."

"What are we to think, then?" said Ethel.

"Shall we call the police?" I suggested.

Margery said, "Ethel, it's like the television shows. He wouldn't want to call the police if he'd done it."

"Give him some of the torte, if that's what you're driving at," said Ethel.

I found the torte slightly too rich for my taste, but I was in no position to say so.

When I opened Margery and Ethel's door to admit the police, I was greeted with what seemed a vision: my regular racquetball partner, Detective Sergeant Dante Mascino.

"Dante," I said. "What gracious timing. What have I always said about the grace of God?"

"Among other things," he said, "that it often comes at the cost of great suffering."

Inside the door, before we went into the parlor, Dante imparted some bad news to me. Including Margery and Ethel's, the police had received no less than three different reports of theft the day before.

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Both the other victims had been elderly people imprisoned in wheelchairs who I had allegedly called to ask if I could come for a visit a day or two early. They had expressed some surprise but were in no position to turn away one of their few contacts with the outside world. They had all agreed and unlocked their doors a day early.

Dante went in to Margery and Ethel, took their statements and a piece of the filbert torte, which he heartily praised, and excused himself. After a protracted apology made on behalf of this unknown alter ego who was preying on the defenseless, I excused myself as well.

We got into Dante's car and he drove me to the church. I invited him to the office for coffee. (I don't drink it, but keep it on hand for the majority who do.) He had never seen my office, and occupied himself glancing at the pictures, diplomas, and shelves of books ranged about the walls. I felt his discomfort, both with the church and with the official capacity of his visit.

"Tell me your ideas, Dante," I said.

"It's tough, Dave. I know you. I think I know you, anyway. No, I do. I know you. You wouldn't do something like this. But that means whoever did it knows your schedule, knows something about these old folks, even knows how to sound just like you. He—"

"He or she," I corrected him, inclusive language being an important issue in this minister's agenda.

Dante looked at me. "It doesn't seem likely a woman could do *your* voice."

"Stranger things have happened," I said. "We have a new acolyte who can make his voice sound just like my wife's."

Dante's face lightened. "*Just* like your wife's? How do you know that?"

"I heard him. This past Sunday."

"Would he have access to your schedule?"

"Dante," I said, "I don't think he could possibly be the one. The boy's not bright enough. He's all lust and broad shoulders. And he doesn't know the first thing about our shut-ins yet. There's only one boy I've trusted enough to take with me on my communion visits. And he's already announced he's going into the ministry."

"Who's that?"

"My other acolyte of the moment. Michael McClintock."

"Not the Michael McClintock I would know about, who hot-wired a Corvette at the tender age of eleven?"

"He's reformed."

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Dante didn't seem interested in my case study. "Who are you scheduled to visit tomorrow?" he asked. "Anyone infirm?"

I didn't need to consult my book. I was scheduled to visit Gladys Owen, a wonderful old woman confined to her bed. Her niece Tracy, a lovely young thing who'd just graduated from high school and seemed just as directionless for having done so, took care of her aunt through the day. One of Tracy's few respites each week was my hour-long visit, when she could go out of the house for lunch.

"After you," said Dante, showing me the door.

I somehow knew it would be both of them, and that they would still be there when we arrived. As I stepped up onto the porch, I couldn't help feeling especially disappointed by Michael's regress. He would set back the esteem in which the congregation had held the position of acolyte. He would break my heart as well. His had been too extreme a turnaround, too sudden a transformation. I had credited the mysterious workings of the grace of God for such a speedy transition, but it struck me now that perhaps I had given grace too heavy a burden in this instance.

It was only after we found the house unlocked (Tracy sometimes left the door unlocked for me in case she was attending to her aunt when I arrived) that I wondered how Daniel and Michael would bypass the inevitable recognition factor in the Owen home. Gladys Owen's eyes were not the best, but Tracy had vibrant young eyes that would see this scam for what it was a mile away. Violence struck me then as a very real possibility, but I refused to believe the boys capable of it.

Inside the house, we heard my voice (I would have attested, in different circumstances, that the voice was a very high-quality recording of my own)—it came from upstairs, and we traced it to Daniel.

He was standing in the doorway to Gladys' bedroom, conducting an amiable conversation about local weather patterns with Gladys, who requested more than once in the short time we were listening that I come over closer to the bed, where she could see me better. When I personally obliged, it must have been a surprise to Daniel.

Dante grasped his shoulder and spun him around. "Where's your partner?" he demanded.

"What's going on, Reverend Fielding?" said Gladys.

"I'll explain in a moment, Gladys," I said. "But first I need to go downstairs."

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Dante said, "No. That kid's the one I'm worried about. He's got a record longer than your arm, Dave."

"Who's he talking about?" Daniel asked me.

"You keep quiet, young man," I said. To Dante I said, "Don't worry, it's not Michael."

I excused myself and went downstairs, where I found Tracy scouring the first floor of its valuables. I thought of Michael, and the mustard seed of faith I'd planted seemed ripe for further irrigation.

Dante had followed me, dragging Daniel with his left hand, his service revolver attendant in his right.

"Oh ye of little faith," I said to him.

"Oh ye of little sense," he shot back, returning the gun to his shoulder harness. He took hold of Tracy's arm with his freed hand. "If you'll see to Mrs. Owen," he told me, "I'll just be running along with these two sweet kids here."

He seemed ferociously anxious to get the mechanics of justice into motion. When I returned to Gladys, the reason for his haste became apparent. She had deciphered enough of the afternoon's events to be weeping, a slow leak of tears that made her look as if she were melting. I stayed with her until her night nurse arrived around nine.

Dante had left a message on my answering machine when I got home. My wife was out at a women's meeting. I found myself wishing she were home. I heated up her barley soup, poured some in a mug, grabbed a spoon, and called Dante.

"I thought you'd want to know as soon as possible," he said. "They did them all, the niece and your boy. It seems it was just a brainstorm of youth: he was a good mimic, he's got a bit of a chip on his shoulder about you, neither of them have any money, and she knew how to get some.

"She got the lowdown indirectly from you, of all people. You would give her poor aunt a rundown on all the people you'd visited that day or the day before. Mrs. Owen, a sweet old girl who doesn't get nearly enough opportunity to talk, innocently passed along the information to her niece. For a while, Tracy just kind of put up with listening to it—but then when she and Daniel hooked up and she learned about his talent for voices, the idea clicked in place and she began pumping her aunt for all the information she could get.

"Your boy is something of a Valentino for his age. This girl's nearly five years older than he is and yet she seems to be in love with him. Go figure. At first her plan was to have him pose as a

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policeman, but there were problems there. Which one? And for the people who could see, how could he be made to look like a policeman? When he started mimicking you, the gears meshed and she started pumping her aunt for the details of your schedule.

"The girl's a tiger, but I think the boy feels sorry about the whole thing. He doesn't strike me as a personality that's cut out for crime, though they'll have to keep some solid chains on that libido of his. His parents still say they have high hopes for him. His father tells me the kid has 'the voice of an angel.' My rapier wit could have done a lot with that one, but I didn't have the heart."

"I know," I said.

"How's the old girl doing, anyway?"

"Maintaining. But you know, she's at the age where she'd rather lose the silver and keep her loved ones."

"Well, she's better off without this one. Tracy Owen would sell the blood out of her aunt's veins for the right price. She's been taking her aunt's money regularly for months, straight from her pocketbook. She didn't betray a moment of shame in telling me about it."

I waited, but he didn't have anything else to say. We set up our next date at the racquetball courts and said goodnight.

I wouldn't have minded a modest compliment from the expert for my having discerned the accomplice to be Tracy at the last minute, but not at the expense of my friend's comfort. Besides, I thought, it hadn't really been the work of deduction at all. No detective, I could hear Dante saying to me, would last a single day on the streets with faith as his primary technique. I supposed he would be right, and this made me very sad.

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a *NEW* Baytown story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Life is harder for some people," Kemp said, feeling afraid.
"Life is what we have to do," Murph Miller replied.
"If you're so smart, why aren't you dead?"
Miller sounded disgusted: "Not even you are that cynical . . ."

ONE DAY AT A TIME

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Sam Kemp waited in the doorway of Miller's Service Station, keeping quiet until Murph Miller finished reading a letter. Kemp wanted to borrow a couple of dollars. Miller's big face was blank as he handed over the typewritten page, saying, "Tell me what you make of that."

After a couple of attempts, Kemp managed to focus his eyes. The letter said: "Dear Dad, I hate to ask you for money again, but things are tight at the moment. The band has a gig coming up, so the future looks good. But right now I need $3,000. I know it's a lot, but can you manage to send it to me? Please mail it to the apartment on Lincoln. And don't worry, I'm fine. Lots of love—Maddie."

Kemp handed back the letter. "Even the signature is typed," he observed.

"Can I believe this letter?"

"I wouldn't." If Murph sent the girl three grand, there might not be anything left for Kemp.

"Maybe I'll call her." Miller put his hand on the telephone beside the keyboard controlling the self-service pumps. He stared through the window at the empty forecourt. It was a quiet October morning in Baytown. The tourists had caught their fish and gone home. "Will she tell me what she wants the money for?"

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"The letter isn't from her." Across the road, Kemp could see the door standing open at Colonial Wines. He needed to get his half gallon of red and wander on down to Victoria Park. "Those musicians she lives with are capable of anything."

The Montreal band that had come through town last year was called The Purple Truth. They performed their one-nighter at the County Gardens and hit the road in the wee small hours. Maddie Miller could play the guitar and sing. She went with them in their van, carrying her instrument, a suitcase of clothes, and some money saved from her job at the Imperial Bank. The note she left on the kitchen table said she had to grab this chance and didn't want her father talking her out of it and she loved him. She was nineteen years old.

"You're right, Sam," Miller said. "That guy Peltier could have typed the letter. He knows I sent her five hundred in June. He could be hitting me for more." The service-station owner picked up the telephone. "I'll see what she says."

Kemp murmured, "Could I get a deuce from you, Murph?"—but Miller was dialing.

Roger Peltier came on the line, sounding distant. When he heard it was Maddie's father, he forced some enthusiasm, but it was thin. "She isn't here right now."

"She's written asking me for a lot of money. I don't feel good about her letter."

"I heard her talk about money. She has a chance to invest in something."

"I'd like her to tell me about it."

"There's a time limit."

"Have Maddie call me."

Miller put down the telephone. Sam was still there. "I don't like it. The guy sounds stressed."

"Maddie wasn't around?"

"Peltier says send the money. But apparently she wasn't there."

Kemp craved wine. "Her signature was typed. Are you calling the cops?"

"I may have to go down there." Miller folded the letter and tucked it into the breast pocket of his coverall, behind the *Murph* stitched in red.

"You've never been to Montreal," Kemp said.

"How tough can it be? You survived there for several years." Miller handed a couple of dollars to Kemp, who carried the money like a

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battlefield despatch as he limped across Front Street to Colonial Wines.

There was always a period of about half an hour, early in Kemp's drinking bouts, when he felt good. Or what amounted to good these days. That was when the autumn afternoon got through to him and he remembered how it used to be. The times he recalled mostly had to do with high school. Murph Miller was a newcomer then, a basketball flash who had no trouble getting girls. Kemp was about to graduate and go back to the farm, so their current friendship wasn't based on experiences in school. Kemp exaggerated the connection so he could ask for money.

Life on the farm had been hard work. It was years later when the fire from the old kerosene stove destroyed the house and killed Kemp's parents. After that, Sam accepted a room and a job at a neighboring farm. On his twenty-sixth birthday, he gave himself a present. He moved into town and took work at the Coronet Hotel, hustling beer.

He was thirty-two when the peanut girl entered his life. She was one of a group doing a sampling campaign for a national company. One evening, Kemp served her a couple of beers. When the beverage room closed, they went out to eat. Five days later, when the team was leaving town, Kemp did a crazy thing. He was seeing her off at the railway station and, cold sober, with nothing but the clothes on his back and a week's pay in his pocket, he got aboard the train with her and went to Montreal.

That was the beginning of four good years—one with her and three on his own. Kemp worked at the Rymark Tavern on Peel Street. The money was good and he got around. Two consecutive summers he took a job as waiter at McGregor's Inn on Lac des Sables near Ste. Agathe in the Laurentiens.

Back in Montreal on a chilly November night, drunk enough not to care, he took on a couple of blue overcoats outside the Clover Cafe. They knocked him down and put the boots to him. He was in Royal Victoria intensive care for three days. They said he was lucky to escape brain damage. Maybe he didn't escape it. Or it could be alcohol that blurred his thinking.

Kemp's tavern job was gone by the time he recuperated. He came home to Baytown, took a cheap room on Station Street, and fattened himself up. Jack Danforth at the Coronet took pity on him and let him try serving beer again. When it became obvious he was too

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slow, the boss shifted him to the boiler room. Here, he looked after the furnace, kept the automatic stoker filled with coal, and was available for odd jobs around the hotel. But it was too easy to drink back there alone in the dark and one night the furnace went out. And so did Sam Kemp—out onto Front Street, to sleep rough in good weather, or otherwise in an empty jail cell made available by Chief Greb. Baytown tolerated Sam Kemp. He was seen as a malady that would cure itself in time.

The half gallon Kemp bought with Miller's deuce saw him through two days. He wasn't yet the wino he was on his way to becoming. He could still take down food. He washed some dishes at the Paragon Cafe and they gave him a meal. Then he wandered on up to the service station. The place was busy and he washed a few windshields at the Full Serve. When it got quiet again, he went into the office and found Murph briefing his senior mechanic to take over for a few days. When the guy went into the lube-bay, Miller said, "I'm going to Montreal. Maddie never telephoned. Something's going on."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I have to take a look."

"It's a big city."

"I have her address. Lincoln Avenue."

Kemp knew where that was. "You'll be spinning your wheels."

"I have to try."

"Good luck. When are you going?"

"Tomorrow morning," Miller said. He didn't sound optimistic.

Kemp approached the Coronet from the river lane. He went in through the kitchen, greeting his old workmates, and climbed the back stairs to the linen room. Mary Peevey was on duty. He told her what he required and she found something for him. It was a beige seersucker suit abandoned by a skip. She produced a blue shirt and a brown tie with a horseshoe pattern. Kemp also needed sleep. Mary gave him permission to crash in his old room down the back hall, the one he had occupied while he was boilerman.

When he told her he was going to Montreal but gave no details, keeping Murph's business confidential, she told him, "You're safer here, Sammy."

"I'll be back."

"Clean yourself up and cut out the wine. I bet I can get Mr. Danforth to give you back your job."

"Never happen," Kemp said.

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When he woke up after a fair sleep, he found the suit, shirt, and tie hanging on the back of the door. Mary had ironed everything. There was a disposable razor and a can of foam on the sink, and he shaved. He wanted a drink, but he could do without it. Maybe he wasn't as far gone as he thought. Maybe he just needed something to do.

The suit was too small, showing plenty of wrist and ankle. Kemp left the jacket unbuttoned so he could move his shoulders. His face in the mirror looked naked and surprised.

In the linen room, Mary approved of everything except his filthy running shoes. She searched in a closet and found a pair of brown-and-white wingtips with pointed toes. They were size 13, but "Better too big than too tight," Mary said, stuffing them with crumpled newspaper.

With the shoes laced on, Kemp felt as if you could knock him down and he would spring back up like a topsy-turvy doll. He clumped up Front Street to Miller's at ten in the morning. Murph was dressed for travel, looking prosperous in grey slacks and a suede windbreaker. "What's with *you?*" he asked Kemp.

"You need a guide," Sam said, feeling warmth in his face. "Somebody who knows Montreal."

"Guide, hell. I need a friend," Miller told him. "Get in the car."

They barreled east on 401 in the blue Continental. Miller said he wanted to stay in Montreal, but probably not at one of the big hotels. Kemp remembered the Bluebird Motel on Upper Lachine Road and was surprised to find it still there. They took a cabin with twin beds. Miller unpacked his suitcase while Kemp emptied the contents Mary had given him from the plastic bag. It was four o'clock in the afternoon.

"Do you want to eat or what?" Kemp asked.

"I want to drive around to Lincoln Avenue." Miller gave his friend a glance. "We can get you a drink first."

"I've stopped that for the duration," Kemp told him. They returned to the car and he gave Miller directions on driving to the Forum at the Atwater intersection, then up Closse Street and around the corner onto Lincoln. Maddie's apartment building was three stories, dark-red brick, just past the corner of Chomedy.

Miller parked the car and they went inside. The reflection of Kemp's suit in the glass door was comic, but he was getting used to the sound and feel of the shoes. The marble floor of the corridor

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needed washing, the place smelled of mildew. Miller led the way to 105 and knocked on the door. After half a minute, he knocked again, longer and harder. The door across the hall opened and a young man looked out.

"They've gone." He was bearded and wore glasses and had a studious look. Maybe his friends called him "Trotsky."

"I'm looking for Maddie Miller."

"Are you the cops?"

"I'm her father." Miller crossed the corridor. "Do you know where she went?"

"No, but they're both gone. She yelled the roof off a few nights ago. We were all out here in the hall—it sounded like somebody being killed. But then it got quiet and Roger came out and apologized. So we went back to bed."

"How do you know they've gone?"

"Because he said goodbye. Hey, if you're her father—" The young man ducked inside and returned carrying a guitar case. "Peltier needed traveling money. He left this with me for two hundred dollars. I'd appreciate it if you'd pay me." He opened the case.

Miller recognized Maddie's guitar. He asked Kemp to hold it while he fished four fifties out of his wallet. Trotsky was admiring the seersucker suit. "They used to wear 'em like that," he said.

Back behind the wheel of the Continental, Miller said, "He's done something with her."

Kemp allowed the situation to sink in. "It doesn't feel that way to me."

"Where is she? Peltier wrote the letter asking for three grand, I'm convinced of that. When I telephoned, he encouraged me to send it. There was a noisy fight, then he sells Maddie's guitar and takes off."

"If it was foul play, he wouldn't sell it to somebody who knows him—he'd take it to a pawn shop."

"If he was normal. Junkies do anything."

It was time to eat. They were driving past fine restaurants, including Desjardin's, but Kemp refused to enter the places in the suit he was wearing. Miller wanted to buy him something off the rack, but Kemp said he must be crazy to suggest spending that kind of money. They ended up at the Rymark Tavern, where they ate ham and beans, Miller drinking beer and Kemp staying with coffee.

With nothing further to be done that evening, they took in a

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movie. It was a modern thriller, with realistic blood and cars crashing and no heart. Kemp said it would take ten of these to equal one *Asphalt Jungle*. And they would have to throw in a year's supply of popcorn.

They came out onto Ste. Catherine Street feeling flat. Kemp led the way on a walk through Dominion Square. With winter only weeks away, the winos were getting in some final bench-time. Miller used these pathetic characters as the text for a sermon on work and dedication and thrift—values Kemp had abandoned. "There but for the grace of God," Miller concluded, "goes Sam Kemp."

"Life is harder for some people," Kemp said, feeling afraid.

"Life is what we have to do."

"If you're so smart, why aren't you dead?"

Miller sounded disgusted: "Not even you are that cynical."

Kemp remembered a radio program that used to saturate the old house with inspirational music on endless Sunday afternoons. He sang now in a syrupy voice:

"I love life and I want to live—
To drink of life's fullness, take all it can give—"

They drove back to the Bluebird and Miller carried Maddie's guitar inside. Kemp switched on the television. A girl delivering local news was talking about a hit-and-run that had taken the life of a cyclist, leaving flecks of yellow paint on the road along with broken glass from a headlight.

"Look what I found," Miller said. "It was under Maddie's guitar." He was holding a few sheets of music manuscript paper. The lines of staff were inscribed with notes. Kemp took a look. The title of the piece was "Sand Lake Lullaby." Neat lettering at the top of the page attributed music and lyrics to Maddie Miller.

While Kemp used the bathroom and brushed his teeth, Miller sat on the bed trying to read the music. He was humming the tune without much success. When his companion came back into the room, he said, "I feel this should help us find her. Like a clue. I know she didn't leave it for me to see. But it's as if she did."

"Sand Lake is Lac des Sables," Kemp said. "That's near Ste. Agathe in the Laurentiens. I worked a couple of summers at a hotel up there called McGregor's Inn."

"Does that help us?"

"They always had a group playing in the lounge."

"Do you remember the telephone number?"

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"Sure do." Kemp recited three digits. "It's called Information."

Miller obtained the number of McGregor's Inn and dialed it. He asked the person who answered, "Can you tell me the name of the group you have playing in your lounge?" When he put the phone down, his eyes were hot. "The group is called The Purple Truth. That's Peltier's combo."

"Call again and ask to speak to Maddie."

"No. I don't want to stampede anybody. I want to walk in the place and take my daughter by the hand and say, 'Tell me what's going on.' "

They drove north on the Autoroute through a brilliant autumn morning. Flat ground gradually gave way to foothills that merged with the eroded slopes of ancient mountains. The leaves were changing colors—red, orange, yellow, brown. Each turn in the road revealed a display that first excited the men in the car and then silenced them.

McGregor's Inn was a large stucco building with some Tudor beams on the second story. The effect was spoiled by an extension built out of concrete blocks. The youth behind the reception desk was wearing a badge that said he was Mario. Mario had not been there during Kemp's time. He told Miller the band didn't start performing until nine, but he thought somebody was rehearsing in the lounge.

Kemp led the way through the lobby into a mirrored room with maroon-leather furniture. The lights were turned off, but pale sunlight reflected off the lake was filtering through curtained windows. On the piano at the end of the room, a gooseneck lamp gleamed. A thin, pale girl was playing chords and singing to herself.

Miller approached. "I'm trying to find Maddie Miller. And Roger Peltier if he's around. I'm her father."

"You've come for nothing." The girl had an English accent. Her oval face was without makeup under short, bleached hair brushed neatly forward. She might have been a gentle boy instead of this elfin girl. "There was a fight in Montreal. They didn't come with us."

"I heard about the fight. Do you know where she went?"

"You *are* her father? Yes, I see the resemblance. Well—" The chords modulated to a minor key. "Maddie was preggers. She didn't want the baby. Her career is all that matters to Maddie. Roger's the

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father and he wanted her to stop working and have the kid. He also wanted her to stop drinking. That's what they fought about."

"Pregnant." Miller was stunned. "I have to find her."

"There's a place you might try. By the way, I'm Sasha. Maddie asked me where she could go to get rid of the baby and I gave her Dr. Micah's address." The girl studied Miller's mournful face. "Would you like a snapshot of her? I have a recent one." She searched inside her purse, found her wallet, and took out a black-and-white snap. She handed it to Murph.

He studied the photo, saw Maddie and Peltier standing beside a light-colored Volkswagen. She looked tense, he looked serious. "Where is this doctor's place?"

"In Ste. Rose, right beside the highway. You drove past it coming here."

"I know where it is," Kemp said.

Sasha's eyes met Kemp's. They stared, knowing they would not be seeing each other again.

"Something else, Mr. Miller," she said, looking back at him. "Do you realize your daughter is a lush?"

The drive back down out of the Laurentiens was quicker and sadder with the glorious trees behind them and the light fading. "When I was trying to dry out one time while I was working here," Kemp said, "Micah's clinic was suggested. But I couldn't afford it."

The clinic was a collection of buildings on the back river. The main structure was solid stone, with small windows through walls two feet thick. Time was when Iroquois drifted past in birchbark canoes, avoiding this fortress that would be difficult to enter and impossible to burn. Miller asked to see the patient, Madeleine Miller. The receptionist checked her list and announced there was no such name.

Dr. Micah came out of an office behind the desk. He was a bantamweight, dressed in blue pinstripe like a bank manager. He recalled the Peltier-Miller interview. "I spoke to your daughter," he said. "She was ready to come in. Then the young man drove by and cancelled. He said they couldn't raise the money. We have an easy-payment plan, reasonable interest charges. He still said no." The doctor showed his disapproval. "One of these fathers who thinks having a baby is a great idea. Because he doesn't have to grow it in his gut . . ."

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On the long drive back to Baytown, Miller said, "Whatever bad has happened to her, I'm the cause of it."

"Why?"

"I should have sent the three grand. Without money, she may have gone to God-knows-what butcher. She may be dead."

"You're a typical father," Kemp said. "You have this daughter and you think her entire life hinges on you."

"What do I do? Call my runaway wife in Zurich and say, 'Come home, your abandoned daughter needs a mother's care'?"

"Don't do that," Kemp said, remembering the woman's behavior through the years. "She might come."

Miller made a left off the 401 onto the feeder road leading home. "Too bad we struck out," he said. "Thanks for coming with me."

"You've got her guitar," Kemp said. "And the song she wrote." As Baytown reached out to grab him, he felt the return of his craving for wine. Miller read his mind.

"Stay with me," he said. "We'll head up to the house and I'll pour us a drink." They were nearing the houses on Bridge Street when he completed the thought. "And you can get out of the suit and shoes. I've got some clothes for you and don't give me a hard time."

They saw the yellow Volkswagen as soon as Miller opened the garage door. The right headlight was smashed and a lot of paint was gone from the bent fender. Miller said, "What the hell—?"

Kemp crouched by the damaged front end. On television in Montreal there was that report of a hit-run. Somebody on a bike got killed and they found yellow paint. And they knew a headlight was smashed.

"This is the car in the snapshot." Miller took the picture from his wallet and compared cars. "Peltier must have been driving."

"Or Maddie."

They went inside and heard movement upstairs. A young man came down on the double. He had a black crewcut and an open face. "Mr. Miller, I'm Roger Peltier." He pronounced his name Rah-zjay. "I didn't break in. We used Maddie's key."

"Is that the hit-run car in the garage?"

"Yes sir. Maddie was driving. I drove it here because it was too late to go to the police. When the kid died and the media got on it, they were ready to lynch the driver."

"How do I know Maddie was driving?" Miller erupted. "It could have been you."

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"Listen to him, Murph," Kemp said. Then he asked Peltier, "Was she drunk?"

"All the time. I told her so much booze would harm the baby. She said she was getting rid of the baby. All she wants is her career. Singing with the band. Writing songs."

"Is she any good?"

The musician blinked. "She can play the instrument. Her songs are derivative."

Miller thought about the situation. He calmed down. "Where is she?"

"I don't know. I tried to keep her here. I thought we'd find you home and you could take over. When we arrived and you were gone, I tried to keep her sedated."

"What with?"

"I have some capsules we got from Dr. Micah. He runs a clinic. She must have been spitting them out. This morning, she was gone when I woke up. I've checked out all the bars in town."

"I hate this," Miller said. "She could be anywhere."

Kemp said, "I have an idea. Let's get in the car."

The three men drove to Victoria Park at the end of Front Street, where the river runs into the bay. Kemp saw a few of his cronies clustered by the stone parapet, brown-bagged bottles between their knees. "If we run into Maddie," he said, "don't go after her, Murph. Let me talk to her."

"Why would she be here with these losers?"

"Don't you get it?" Kemp asked. "The town hardly ever comes here. Don't you feel the freedom?"

She was there. Miller spotted her sitting on the far end of the parapet where the broad water started, her legs hanging down on the river side. "I see her," he said. He raised his voice. "Maddie!"

She turned at the call, squinting into the sun. Seeing the men approaching, she got up and began to move unsteadily away from them along the top of the wall. Kemp started after her, trotting awkwardly in the heavy shoes. She was a rough-looking figure in jeans and dirty bare feet and a torn man's shirt with the tail out. Kemp thought, She wants to be one of us.

Then he called, "Nobody's coming after you, Maddie! Let me talk to you!"

As she began to turn, she lost her balance, teetered on the edge of the parapet, and then fell backward, arms flailing, ten feet down into the water. Kemp was running, kicking out of the loose shoes

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as he heard the men behind him start to yell. He had time to take the jacket off before he felt the stone under his sock feet and pushed forward into a dive.

He was in the water, but he had no idea where the girl was. Then he saw the cloudy swirl of her hair below him. He reached for it and got hold, dragging her to the surface. He turned her on her back and stretched her out so she floated, doing his best to tread water.

Roger Peltier was in the river now, appoaching with a powerful stroke. As he took over, Kemp kicked away from them—and felt sudden fatigue. He became aware of the river and the bay under and around him, miles of it. I can't get out, he thought. A mouthful of water tasted warm. It smelled of summer. He never got to swim, living on the farm. The kids in high school called him farmer. Kemp began to struggle, kicking, smacking the water with his arms. He went under. His ears were bursting. It was dark.

Murph Miller came to see his daughter before she went to sleep. She said, "I've been thinking about what you suggested, Daddy."

"And?"

"I'm going to stay here and have the baby. Then I'll decide."

"That's right. One day at a time."

"I'm not sure I want Roger to stay."

"He can work for me at the service station. Think about it."

She gave him a puzzled look. "You're trying to give me what I want. But I'm not sure what I want."

"Nobody is sure."

As she closed her eyes, she said, "Sam Kemp could hardly swim. Why did he jump in the water?"

"I don't know," Miller said. "Maybe someday I'll have a chance to ask him."

After she was asleep, he went out to the garage and stood looking at the damage on the VW. Peltier came and stood beside him. "She was driving too fast," he said. "And she'd been drinking. But the kid on the bike drove off the sidewalk right in front of her."

"She should have stopped."

"I know. I was yelling at her to turn around and go back."

"I can put on a new headlight," Miller said. "I can fix the paint."

Peltier just waited.

"Or I can go in and telephone the police. Show them this the way it is."

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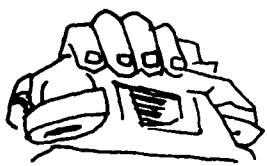
"It's up to you, Mr. Miller. I tried to conceal the crime. I'm an accessory."

"Will she ever forgive me if I turn her in?" For the first time, Miller went eye-to-eye with the father of his grandchild.

"You know her better than I do," Peltier said.

Miller switched off the garage light. "And I don't know her at all," he said.



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A distinguished reprint in honor of the father of the detective story, who died October 7, 1849 ("God help my poor soul") . . .

THE BLACK CAT

by EDGAR ALLAN POE

For the most wild, yet most homely, narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream. But tomorrow I die, and today I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me they have presented little but horror—to many they still seem less terrible than *barroques*. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace—some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects.

From my infancy, I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere man.

I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable

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kind. We had birds, goldfish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a cat.

This latter was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever *serious* upon this point—and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.

Pluto—this was the cat's name—was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.

Our friendship lasted in this manner for several years, during which my general temperament and character—through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance—had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected but ill-used them. For Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I made no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when by accident, or through affection, they came in my way. But my disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol!—and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old and consequently somewhat peevish, even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill-temper.

One night, returning home much intoxicated from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him—when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed at once to take its flight from my body and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fiber of my frame. I took from my waistcoat pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.

When reason returned with the morning—when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch—I experienced a sentiment half

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of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty. But it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.

In the meantime, the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented, it is true, a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me, but this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of perverseness.

Of this spirit, philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action for no other reason than because he knows he should *not?* Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our last judgment, to violate that which is law merely because we understand it to be such?

This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex itself*—to offer violence to its own nature, to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted on the unoffending brute. One morning in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree—hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes and with the bitterest remorse at my heart, hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offense, hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it, if such a thing were possible, even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

On the night of the day on which this cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair.

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I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect.

On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. The plastering had here, in great measure, resisted the action of the fire—a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread.

About this wall a dense crowd had collected, and many persons seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with very minute and eager attention. The words "strange!" "singular!" and other similar expressions excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in bas-relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvelous. There was a rope about the animal's neck.

When I first beheld this apparition—for I could scarcely regard it as less—my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remember, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd—and someone by whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown through an open window into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of the other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly spread plaster, the lime of which with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.

Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat, and during this period there came back into my spirit a half sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place.

One night as I sat, half stupefied, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object reposing

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upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of gin, or of rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon. I approached it, and touched it with my hands.

It was a black cat—a very large one—fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body, but this cat had a large although indefinite splotch of white covering nearly the whole region of the breast.

Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it of the landlord, but this person made no claim to it—knew nothing of it—had never seen it before.

I continued my caresses, and when I prepared to go home the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so, occasionally stopping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house, it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite with my wife.

For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated, but—I know not how or why it was—its evident fondness for me rather disgusted and annoyed.

By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature, a certain sense of shame and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty preventing me from physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike or otherwise violently ill-use it but gradually—very gradually—I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence as from the breath of a pestilence.

What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife, who, as I have already said, possessed in a high degree that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures.

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which

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it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk, it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber in this manner to my breast. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime but chiefly—let me confess it at once—by absolute *dread* of the beast.

This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to own—yes, even in this felon's cell, I am almost ashamed to own—that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me had been heightened by one of the merest chimeras it would be possible to conceive.

My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the character of the mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite. But by slow degrees—degrees almost imperceptible, and which for a long time my reason struggled to reject as fanciful—it had, at length, assumed the rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name—and for this, above all, I loathed and dreaded and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared—it was now, I say, the image of a hideous, of a ghastly thing—of the gallows! Oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!

And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere humanity. And a brute beast—whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed—a brute beast to work out for *me*, a man fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable woe! Alas, neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of rest any more! During the former, the creature left me no moment alone and in the latter I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate Nightmare that I had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon my heart!

Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my

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sole intimates—the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind while, for the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself—my uncomplaining wife, alas, was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.

One day she accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting in my wrath the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed at the animal a blow, which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife.

Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain.

She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan.

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it in the well in the yard and then about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than any of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar—as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims.

For a purpose such as this, the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection caused by a false chimney or fireplace that had been filled up and made to resemble the rest of the cellar. I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.

And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crowbar, I easily dislodged the bricks and, having carefully deposited the body

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against the inner wall, I propped it in that position while with little trouble I relaid the whole structure as it originally stood.

Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old—and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly and said to myself, Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain.

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness—for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it at that moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate—but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger and forbore to present itself in my present mood.

It is impossible to describe or to imagine the deep, the blissful sense of relief the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom. It did not make its appearance during the night—and thus for one night, at least, since its introduction into the house I soundly and tranquilly slept. Aye, *slept*, even with the burden of murder upon my soul!

The second and third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free man. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted—but, of course, nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured.

Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came very unexpectedly into the house and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises. Secure, however, in the inscrutability of my place of concealment, I felt no embarrassment whatever. The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar. I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to depart. The glee at my heart was too strong to be

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restrained. I burned to say if but one word by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, "I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health and a little more courtesy. By the by, gentlemen, this is a very well constructed house." (In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.) "I may say an *excellently* well constructed house. These walls—are you going, gentlemen?—these walls are solidly put together." And here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily with a cane, which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend, no sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl, a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation!

Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant, the party upon the stairs remained motionless through extremity of terror and of awe. In the next, a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman! I had walled the monster up within the tomb!

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A story selected especially for you from Lilian Jackson Braun's collection of mystery stories about cats, The Cat Who Had 14 Tales, *just published in paperback by Jove . . .*

STANLEY AND SPOOK

by LILIAN JACKSON BRAUN

When I first met Jane she used to say: "I'd rather have kittens than kids." Then years later she had one of each: Stanley and Spook, a most unusual pair. She also had a successful engineer for a husband and a lovely house in the Chicago suburbs and a new car every year.

In the interim we had kept in touch, more or less, by means of Christmas cards and vacation postcards. Then one spring I attended a business conference in Chicago and telephoned Jane to say hello.

She was elated! "Linda, you've got to come out here for a visit when you've finished with your meetings. Ed has an engineering job in Saudi Arabia, and I'm here alone with Stanley and Spook. I'd love to have you meet them. And you and I can talk about old times."

She gave me directions. "When you get off the freeway, go four miles north, then take a left at the cider mill until you come to Maplewood Farms. It's a winding road. We're the last house—white with black shutters and an *enormous* maple tree in front. You can't miss it."

Late Friday afternoon I rented a car and drove to the affluent suburbs, recalling that we had once lived contentedly in tents. Now Jane lived in Maplewood Farms, and I had an apartment with a view on New York's Upper East Side.

When Jane and I first met, we were newly married to a pair of young engineers who were building a dam in the northern wilderness. The first summer, we lived in a sprawling "tent city" and thought it a great adventure. After all, we were young and still had rice in our hair. Eventually, cottages were built for the engineers. *Shacks* would be a better description. Jane decorated hers, I remem-

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ber, with pictures of cats, and for Christmas Ed gave her an amber Persian that she named Maple Sugar. That's when she made her memorable announcement about kittens and kids. All that seemed ages ago.

Arriving at Maplewood Farms, I was driving slowly down the winding avenue admiring the well landscaped houses when I noticed a fire truck at the far end. People were grouped on the lawns and the pavement, watching, but there was no sign of anxiety. Actually, everyone seemed quite happy.

I parked and approached two couples who were standing in the middle of the street, sipping cocktails. "What's happening?" I asked.

A woman in a Moroccan caftan smiled and said: "Spook climbed up the big maple and doesn't know how to get down."

"Third time this month," said a man in an embroidered Mexican shirt. "Up go our taxes! —Would you like a drink, honey?"

The other man suggested: "Why don't they cut down the tree?"

"Or put Spook on a leash," the first woman said. Everyone laughed.

The fire truck had extended its ladder high into the branches of the big maple, and I watched as a fireman climbed up and disappeared into the leafy green. A moment or two later, he came back into view and a cheer went up from the bystanders. He was carrying a small boy in jeans and a Chicago Cubs sweatshirt.

Jane, waiting at the foot of the ladder, hugged and scolded the child—an adorable six-year-old with his father's blond hair and his mother's big brown eyes. Then she and I had a tearful, happy reunion.

"I thought Spook was your *cat*," I said.

"No, *Stanley* is the cat," Jane explained. "There he is on the front step. He's dying to meet you."

Stanley was a big, gorgeous feline with thick blond fur and a spotless white bib. He followed us into the house, his plumed tail waving with authority and aplomb.

Jane instructed her son: "Show Aunt Linda to the guest room and then bring her out to the deck for cocktails."

Spook lugged my overnight case upstairs and showed a great deal of curiosity about its contents when I unpacked. "Are you my aunt?" he wanted to know.

"Not really. But you can call me Aunt Linda. I'd like that."

Then the four of us assembled on the redwood deck overlooking a flawless lawn and a wooded ravine, its edge dotted with clumps

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of jonquils. Jane and Stanley and I made ourselves comfortable on the cushioned wrought-iron chairs, while Spook—now wearing a camouflage jumpsuit—chose to sit on the Indian grass rug at my feet. He was an affectionate little boy and his Buster Brown haircut was charming. He leaned against my legs in a possessive way, and when I rumpled his hair he looked up and smiled happily, then licked his fingers and straightened his blond bangs. I thought to myself, He's as vain as his good-looking father.

As we sipped orange juice and vodka, I asked how Spook got his name.

"He's really Ed Junior," Jane said, "but he was born on Halloween and Ed called him Spook. At school the teacher insists on calling him Edward, but he's Spook to all the neighbors. —Linda, you're the perfect image of a successful young woman executive, just like the pictures in the magazines. I envy you."

Spook said: "Are you a lady engineer?"

"No, I'm an industrial electronic-supplies sales manager."

"Oh," he said, and after a moment added: "Is that hard to do?"

"Not if you like Zener diodes and unijunction transistors."

"Oh," he said, and then he climbed onto my lap.

"Spook dear," his mother admonished, "always ask permission before sitting on laps."

"That's all right," I assured her. "I like little boys."

"He loves to be petted."

"Don't we all? How long will Ed be gone, Jane?"

"Another three weeks."

"Don't you mind his long absences?"

She hesitated. "Yes—but it's a good living. It's paying for a housekeeper five days a week and a good college for Spook and some fabulous vacations."

As we talked, the cat listened, turning his head to watch each of us as we spoke. "Stanley looks so intelligent," I remarked.

"He's good company. He's almost human. —Linda, you never told me why you and Bill divorced."

"I wanted a career of my own," I said. "I was tired of being a dam-builder's wife. The construction camp was driving me up the wall and Bill was drinking heavily. Things were all wrong."

At this point a robin flew into the yard and tugged at a worm, alerting Spook, who jumped from my lap and chased him. The crafty bird took flying hops just lengthy enough to stay beyond the boy's grasp.

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"That robin comes every evening during the cocktail hour," Jane said. "He likes to tease Spook, I think. Stanley isn't the slightest bit interested."

"Are you going to have any more children, Jane?"

"We'd like to adopt a girl. After what I went through with Spook, I couldn't face childbirth again. He was born at the camp, you know—a year or two after you left. I didn't have proper prenatal care because I refused to go to that so-called doctor at the camp. Do you remember him?"

I nodded. "His office smelled more of whiskey than antiseptic."

"He made passes at everybody, and I do mean *everybody!*"

"They couldn't get a really good doctor to go up there and live in those conditions." At that moment a large dog bounded over a fence and headed straight for the boy. Spook had been lying on the lawn, chewing a blade of grass, but he scrambled to his feet and headed for the nearest tree. "Spook, no more climbing, *please!*" his mother called. "Juneau won't hurt you. She just wants to play."

The man in the Mexican shirt came to the fence, calling: "Here, Juneau. Come on home, baby." To us he explained: "She broke her chain again. Sorry."

Precisely as we finished our second drink, Stanley jumped down from his chair with a fifteen-pound *thump* and went to Jane, putting one paw on her knee.

"Stanley's telling me it's time for dinner," she said. "Linda, I'll put the ramekins in the microwave while I'm feeding the cat. Mrs. Phipps fixed chicken divan for us before she left. You might see if you can find the son-and-heir and tell him it's time to wash up."

I wandered around the grounds, noting the professionally perfect flower beds, until I found Spook. He was digging among the jonquils. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Digging," he said.

"You're getting your jumpsuit all muddy. Come and clean up. It's time for dinner."

He raised his nose and sniffed. "Chicken!" he squealed, and headed for the house, running in joyful circles as he went. A few minutes later he appeared at the dinner table, looking spic and span in chinos and a tiger-striped knit shirt, with his face and hands scrubbed and his Buster Brown haircut combed to perfection.

We dined at a table on the deck. Stanley tried to leap onto the redwood railing nearby, but he missed his footing and fell to the floor, landing on his back.

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"Honestly, he's the most awkward cat I've ever seen," Jane muttered. "Come on, Stanley. Aunt Linda won't mind if you sit with us at the table." She indicated the fourth chair, and he lumbered up onto the seat, where he sat tall and attentively. She said: "Stanley's mother was Maple Sugar. Do you remember her, Linda? She had a litter of five kittens, but he was the only one who survived. He's a little odd, but isn't he a beaut?"

Spook was picking chunks of chicken out of his ramekin and gobbling them hungrily.

"Don't forget the broccoli, dear," his mother said. "It makes little boys grow big and strong. Did you tell Aunt Linda you're going to take swimming lessons?"

"I don't want to take swimming lessons," he announced.

"It will be fun, dear. And someday you might be a champion swimmer, just like Daddy before his accident."

"I don't want to take swimming lessons," he repeated, and he scratched his ear vigorously.

"Not at the table, *please*," his mother corrected him.

To change the touchy subject I asked: "What do you like to do best, Spook?"

"Go to the zoo," he said promptly.

"Do you have any favorite animals?"

"Lions and tigers!" His eyes sparkled.

"That reminds me!" I said. Excusing myself, I ran upstairs for the gifts I had brought: a designer scarf for Jane, a cap for Spook with a furry tiger-head on top. My gift for Stanley—a plastic ball with a bell inside—seemed ridiculously inappropriate for the sedate cat. A videotape of Shakespearean readings might have been more to his taste, I told myself.

After Spook had been put to bed, Jane and I spent the evening chatting in the family room, accompanied—of course—by Stanley. Jane talked about her volunteer work and country-club life and Ed's engineering projects around the globe. I talked (boringly perhaps) about thyratrons and ignitrons and linear variable differential transformers. Stanley listened intently, putting in an occasional profound "mew."

I said: "He reminds me of a Supreme Court justice or a distinguished prime minister. How old is he?"

"Same age as Spook. They say a year of a cat's life is equivalent to seven in a human, so he's really forty-two going on forty-nine.

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He and Spook were born on the same day, and we always have a joint birthday party. I never told you about Spook's birth, did I? It's a miracle I lived through it. —Let's have a nightcap and I'll tell you."

She poured sherry and then went on: "Ed intended to have me airlifted to a hospital when my time came, but Spook was three weeks early, and Ed was away—hiring some more construction workers. The doctor was on one of his legendary binges and I refused to go to the infirmary, it was so crude. The boss's wife and a woman from Personnel were with me, but I was screaming and moaning and they were frantic. Finally the sheriff brought a midwife from the nearest town—and then I really did scream! All she needed was a broomstick and a tall black hat. At first I thought she was wearing a Halloween mask!"

"Oh, lord!" I said. "They sent you Cora! Cora Sykes or Sypes or something. She took care of me when I had that terrible swamp fever, and I think she tried to poison me."

"She was an evil woman. She hated everyone connected with the dam."

"It's no wonder she was bitter," I said in Cora's defense. "Her farm was due to be flooded when the dam was completed. She was forcibly removed from the house where she had lived all her life."

Jane looked pensive. "Do you believe in witchcraft, Linda?"

"Not really."

"There was a lot of gossip about that woman after you left the camp. She said—in fact, she boasted—that her ancestors had lived in Salem, Massachusetts. Does that ring a bell? —She told several people that she'd put a curse on the dam."

"I heard about that."

"It looked to me as if the curse was working. After Ed's horrible accident there was a string of peculiar mishaps and an epidemic of some kind. And I never told you this, Linda, but Spook was born blind."

"Jane! I didn't know that! But he's all right now, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's okay, but it gave us a bad scare for a while."

We talked on and on, until I remembered that I had to catch an early plane in the morning.

After I went to bed, I felt uneasy. Maplewood Farms and the dam-building experience were so far removed from my familiar world of tachometer generators and standard interface modules that I longed to return to New York. There was something unsettling, as well,

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about the boy and the cat. It was a situation I wanted to analyze later, when my perspective would be sharper. At the moment, exhaustion at the end of a busy week was putting me to sleep.

At some unthinkably early hour, my slumber was disturbed by a strange sensation. Before opening my eyes I tried to identify it, tried to remember where I was. Not in my New York apartment. Not in a Chicago hotel. I was at Maplewood Farms, and Spook was licking my face!

I jumped to a sitting position.

"Mommy wants to know—eggs or French toast?" he recited carefully.

"Thank you, Spook, but all I want is a roll and coffee. It's too early for anything more."

Frankly, I was glad to say goodbye and head for the airport. The situation at Maplewood Farms was too uncomfortably weird. I dared not think about it while I was driving. After I had boarded the plane and fortified myself with a Bloody Mary, however, I tackled the puzzle of Spook's tree-climbing, bird-stalking, and face-licking. He did everything but purr! Could Jane's inordinate fondness for cats have imprinted her son in some—*spooky* way?

Everything added up. I recalled the way the boy rubbed his head against me when he was pleased, smiling and squeezing his eyes shut. He was afraid of dogs. He was reluctant to swim. At the zoo his preference was for the big cats. He was always licking his fingers to smooth his hair. Then I remembered something else: like a kitten, he had been born blind! I shuddered involuntarily and ordered another Bloody Mary.

While the boy had so many catly traits, Stanley had none at all. How could one explain the situation? Well—they had been born on the same day, they had been born in the same cottage. For both mothers—Jane and Maple Sugar—it had been a difficult birth. And that disagreeable woman—Cora What's-her-name—had been in charge.

Other old friends from the construction camp had told me about Cora's curse on the dam, and although I don't believe such nonsense I had to admit that the project and all those connected with it had suffered a run of bad luck. My marriage broke up, and Bill became an alcoholic. Jane's vain, handsome, athletic husband lost a leg in a bulldozer rollover. Other men were crushed under falling trees or buried in mudslides. And, ironically, the dam was never completed.

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After lives were lost and the environment was desecrated and billions of dollars were spent, the dam was abandoned. They blamed it on political pressure, cost overruns, a new administration in Washington—everything. Now I began to wonder. Was there some truth in what they said about Cora? When she was brought to the camp to nurse me during my fever, she was always moving her lips soundlessly. Was she muttering incantations under her breath?

Could she have cast some kind of spell on the two newborn creatures? Would it be possible to transpose the personality traits of the boy and the cat? Transpose their souls, so to speak? I know more about thyratrons and ignitrons than about souls, but the notion was tantalizing. At thirty-two thousand feet, it's easy to fantasize.

That was in early June. I wrote my thank-you note to Jane and in August received a postcard from Alaska. She and Ed were showing Spook the icebergs and polar bears, but he was fascinated chiefly by the puffin birds.

Then in December the usual expensive Christmas card arrived, with a brief note enclosed.

"Dear Linda: Sad news! My dear Stanley was run over by a bakery truck on Halloween. It was delivering a birthday cake for him and Spook. There will never be another cat like Stanley. I still miss him.

"Otherwise we are well. Spook is seven now and turning into a real boy. He's stopped ear-scratching and people-licking and other childish habits that you probably noticed when you were here. He's taking swimming lessons at the clubhouse and he wants a dog for Christmas. I suppose he was just going through a phase. Love, Jane."

My speculations were right! The mix-up was conjured by that bitter, hateful woman at the construction camp. And Stanley's death—in some mysterious way—had broken the spell.

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a *NEW* Uncle George Crowder story by

HUGH PENTECOST

"When I first saw Hugh and then the holdup man pounding on the writing desk with the gun," Tucker Lawson told Uncle George, "I decided it was a partnership—part of a joke that was about to be played on us."

"I took off my hood because I was afraid someone would think just that," Hugh said.

"The guy probably took off through the back woods after he got rid of the costume," the state trooper said. "Eddie's gone out to the car for torches so we can search."

"A waste of time, I think," Uncle George said . . .

THE DEADLY SPOOK

by HUGH PENTECOST

It all took place on last Halloween, which, you may remember, fell on a Saturday but was generally celebrated on the Friday. For some years now, a Halloween party has been held at the Lakeview Bank and Trust Company after the close of the day's business. The bank employees brought their costumes to work and managed to slip into them just before closing time—all except the tellers, who stayed at their stations until the outside doors were officially closed to the public. Being a Friday, closing time was later than usual—five-thirty in the afternoon.

The whole community was invited to the party, provided they came in costume. Many didn't want to be bothered turning themselves into witches or ghouls of some sort, but they put off doing their bank business until the very last moment in order to get a view of the revelers.

There were more than a hundred costumed guests on hand when

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the electric buzzer sounded the closing of the bank for business, and the non-party goers were beginning to drift toward the front doors when I heard somebody pounding on something. Looking across the main room of the bank, I saw a man at the center writing table, thumping on it. He was something of a shock to the gathering—and a double shock to me. He was wearing the exact same costume I was wearing—a long black smocklike garment that covered him from shoulders to feet, with the silver image of a skeleton painted on it both front and back. A hood, on which was painted a silver skull, obscured his head and face. There were openings for the eyes and mouth.

We were twins, the man at the writing table and I—except that he was pounding the table with the butt of a .45-caliber handgun. I could see his glittering eyes and his white teeth moving behind the openings in his mask. He finally got the attention of everyone.

"This is a holdup!" he announced.

There was a brief moment of silence, and then laughter. A Halloween prank!

The spook raised his gun and fired twice into the ceiling. A faint drift of plaster dust came down on the crowd. He wasn't fooling. There was now dead silence—and he spoke, in a high-pitched voice that suggested a very young man. "I'm going to walk past the tellers' windows with this bag," he said, holding up a piece of material that looked like awning canvas, "and ask them to dump their cash boxes."

He headed toward the first teller's station. Art Ketchum, the teller, backed away, his hands spread out to balance himself on the sides of his booth.

"Ketchum!" a clear male voice called out. "Do what he tells you!"

It was Tucker Lawson, the president of the bank. He had taken off the mask he'd been wearing and there was no doubt about who had issued the order. Ketchum stepped forward and emptied the contents of his cash box into the bandit's bag.

Six of the eight teller stations in the bank were along the east wall, two on the short south side. The west wall is all doors to offices and vaults, and the north end consists of the front doors to the street and the parking area.

The bandit quickly made his way to each of the eight windows. I learned later that he collected about seventy thousand dollars in all. (I should explain here that I'm a reporter for the local newspaper, *The Lakeview Press*, and I've covered this party for quite a few years.) He stopped by the rear door at the south side of the building—it

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opened out into the woods behind the bank—and turned back to look at the crowd. At that moment, someone charged out at him.

"Don't, Terry!" a woman screamed.

Terry Martin was one of the bank's two security guards. He ran at top speed toward the costumed bandit, who quite calmly lowered his gun and fired twice again. Both bullets struck Terry squarely in the forehead and he fell, face down, on the tiled floor, his bloodied face almost touching the bandit's black shoes. There he lay, ominously still.

The bandit looked at us. "Too bad you couldn't keep it cool," he said.

As he turned and hurried out the back door, I heard the shrill sound of sirens approaching the front entrance. Someone had managed to trigger the alarm system that went off in the State Police barracks a few blocks away. I found myself standing next to Tucker Lawson.

"If Terry had waited a moment or two—" Tucker didn't need to finish the comment.

I probably knew everyone crowded around the fallen security guard, but because of their costumes I couldn't be sure who they were—except that I was certain the girl who was cradling Terry Martin's head in her lap was Sally Harper, one of the bank secretaries. She and Terry had been "like that" for a long time. She was crying, out of control. Terry was dead.

A shrill young voice sounded next to me. "They should get Uncle George here to help them," the boy said. It was Joey Trimble, a hero-worshiper beyond belief. His hero was George Crowder, a man with an unhappy history in Lakeview. George had been born and brought up here. After graduating from high school here, he went to Yale, and on from there to law school. He'd come back to Lakeview, opened his own law office, and eventually was elected County Attorney. As such, he had prosecuted a man for murder and gotten a conviction, to much local applause. Some months after the man had died in the gas chamber, evidence surfaced that proved he had been innocent beyond a doubt, the victim of a brilliant prosecutor's strategy. George closed his law office and left town.

Not even his sister, Esther Trimble—married to Hector Trimble, the local druggist—knew where he had gone. Hector wasn't an admirer of his wife's popular brother: "Probably drinking himself to death somewhere," he told anyone who would listen. Then, about five years after his disappearance, George reappeared in Lakeview,

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built himself a cottage in the depths of the woodland section, and never reopened his law office. His greatest admirer was Joey Trimble, Esther's son, now ten years old. The kid has blown George Crowder's horn so loudly that these days almost everybody has forgotten the name of Crowder—he's Uncle George to practically everyone.

The front doors of the bank burst open and state troopers charged in, guns drawn. They were followed by two medics—who ran quickly to where Sally Harper was holding Terry Martin—and by Red Egan, the local sheriff, and Red's close friend, Uncle George Crowder. The crowd shifted away from the murdered guard toward the sheriff and Uncle George.

"He probably had a car parked over at the far side of the woods in back," Red said. "Someone may have seen it. Someone may have seen *him*. What was he wearing?"

"He had on the same costume as Hugh," Tucker Lawson said, pointing to me.

"With a skull on the hood." I held it out for them to see.

"Where did you get it?" Egan asked me.

"Stevens Department Store," I told him.

"If I know Fred Stevens," Uncle George said, "he didn't sell a duplicate to anyone else. He has a policy of selling only one costume of a kind at Halloween. Did you see him, Hugh?"

"Of course," I said. "I noticed right away that he was my twin for the night."

"Well, he's miles away from here by now," Egan said. "Through the back woods to his car, then north or south—who knows?"

"Uncle George can pick up his trail in the woods," Joey Trimble said.

"In pitch-darkness?" Hector Trimble, the boy's father, asked.

"If there is a trail, Uncle George can find it," Joey said.

"You've really sold our boy on your special skills, George," Hector said.

"Did you push the alarm button to the State Police barracks?" Red Egan asked the bank president.

"No," Lawson told him. "I didn't dare make a move. I'd told Ketchum to cooperate with him and he was watching me. I thought if he saw me move in any way he might go all out—as he did with Terry."

I supposed Clarabelle Landis must have gotten to the alarm, but then any one of the tellers could have set it off without making a

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visible move. There are pedal buttons in all the tellers' stations—I know that from a story I did on the bank's security system. There were those alarms, and a TV system that would have a film of the whole charade. (Clarabelle is called Executive Secretary to the President. She is the bank's glamor girl, with red-blonde hair, a slim figure, and a cheerful, smiling approach to life. She would be somewhere in costume. I hadn't yet gotten around to identifying many of the party goers.)

Two state troopers had gone out the back door on the chance of picking up the bandit's trail. They came back now, looking excited, one of them carrying the black-and-silver smock the killer had worn—both the smock and the hood with the silver skull. "He dumped them both outside the back door here," the trooper said.

"Which means," said Uncle George, "that he could have taken off through the woods or walked around to the front and drifted away past the people who were coming in."

"He didn't conveniently leave the money for you anywhere, did he, Pete?" Red Egan asked.

"No such luck," the trooper said.

Clarabelle Landis joined us then, her usually smiling face twisted into an expression of pain. "I called Terry's parents," she said. "They were just leaving for the party here." She looked down at the skeleton costume in the trooper's hands. "My God, Pete, you found that?"

"Outside the back door."

"So anyone outside seeing him wearing it would never guess anything was going wrong."

"No," Uncle George agreed. "There was a costume party going on in the bank. A costume wouldn't have attracted any particular attention—except, perhaps, curiosity about who was wearing it. After the holdup, the only costume that mattered would have been the one the bandit wore—and this one Hugh is wearing."

Tucker Lawson tried a bitter smile. "When I first saw Hugh and then the holdup man pounding on the writing desk with the gun, I decided it was a partnership—part of a joke that was about to be played on us."

"I took off my hood because I was afraid someone would think just that," I said.

"The guy probably took off through the back woods after he got rid of the costume," the state trooper said. "Eddie's gone out to the car for torches so we can search."

"A waste of time, I think," Uncle George said. "All our friend had

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to do was dump his costume, come back around to the front, and walk right back in here, where he was supposed to be."

"You're suggesting someone connected with the bank?" Tucker Lawson asked.

"I'm afraid so, Tucker," Uncle George said. "What do we have? A man who knew that the tellers would be at their stations until after five-thirty. A man who knew that the instant a holdup was announced someone would trigger the alarm to the State Police. Someone who knew, from many practice drills, that it would take them seven or eight minutes to respond, time enough for him to clean out the tellers' cash boxes, which would be a substantial haul, and disappear."

"And the money in his bag?" Tucker asked.

"Hidden in a place prepared well in advance," Uncle George said.

"You don't have a shred of proof for any of this, George," Hector Trimble said.

"Gut feeling," Uncle George told him.

"One of the last times you had a gut feeling," Hector said, "you sent an innocent man to the gas chamber."

"Shut your ugly mouth, Hector," Red Egan said. He faced the rest of us. "I go for George's gut feeling. Let's start searching the bank for the killer's bag."

"He couldn't carry seventy thousand dollars out in his watch pocket, that's for sure," Tucker Lawson said.

"He wouldn't have to carry it away," Uncle George said. "He can take it away tomorrow, or the next day, or next week if he wants to play it safe."

"Meaning?" Lawson asked.

"If he's someone connected with the bank, Tucker, he just has to hide it away somewhere here in the bank and wait for a safe time to remove it—when people have stopped looking for it."

"So you're suggesting everyone be searched before they leave?"

"Everyone and everyone's office," Uncle George said. "And there are vaults and safes that many of you can open. Those should be searched, too."

Tucker Lawson shook his head. "A nasty business," he said. "There isn't an employee of this bank I wouldn't trust with my life."

"Unfortunately, there's an old saying, Lawson, about there being a rotten apple in every barrel."

"What about the women?" Clarabelle Landis asked.

"You'll be treated the same as the men," Egan said.

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"But it wasn't a woman who held up the bank," Hector Trimble said.

"He could have a woman partner," Red explained patiently.

It was finally set up. Everyone was to be subjected to a surface search, and then a body search. That body search for the women would be held in Clarabelle's office by her, following the surface search by a state trooper.

I was one of the first to go through the routine, getting out of the killer's twin costume and then stripping down to satisfy Red Egan. The search wouldn't have satisfied the F.B.I. Everybody knew and trusted everybody. My mother would have been embarrassed when I took off my shirt and revealed a torn undershirt to Red Egan, but I didn't have seventy thousand dollars on board, so may she rest in peace.

Dressed and back to normal, I was able to get back to my job covering the story for *The Lakeview Press*. My reporter's instinct told me that the person to stay close to was Uncle George Crowder. I had seen him go out the back door with one of the troopers to where the killer had discarded his costume, but when I got outside Uncle George and Jake Collins, his trooper ally, were gone, so I followed Uncle George's suggestion of the path the killer might have taken around to the front of the bank.

The men, herded in the front of the bank, had just about all been searched. We knew where the eight tellers had been all through the robbery. Tucker Lawson, Terry Martin, and I, along with two or three others, were it. And we had all come through the search clean as a whistle.

I came in from the parking lot and walked down the corridor toward Clarabelle's office, where she was standing in the doorway with Uncle George. "That does it," Clarabelle was saying. "The female contingent is clean."

"All but one," Uncle George said.

"Oh? Which one, Mr. Crowder?"

"You, love," Uncle George said.

"You're not serious, Mr. Crowder."

"Nobody's clean until they're searched," Uncle George said. "The spook who stole the money was described as having a high-pitched voice—a boy's voice. Could be a woman, wouldn't you say? With everyone thinking 'man,' she could slip away without any problem at all. A woman wouldn't have any problem with a handgun. A

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woman who knew the bank and its routines would have known just how long she had before the State Police answered an alarm. The tellers who were robbed would be thinking man or boy all the way."

"So?"

"I'd like to have a look in the deep drawer of your desk, and in that wall safe." Uncle George pointed.

"I'd think you were joking," Clarabelle said, "if I could associate humor with you."

"Believe me, I'm not joking, Clarabelle."

Her face turned hard and cold. "That drawer contains folders with special information about mortgages the bank has issued."

"I have no interest in mortgage information," Uncle George said. "You know what I'm looking for."

Clarabelle pulled out the drawer which used up the whole right front of her desk. It was jammed with manila folders.

"You want to know what the Farnhams used to secure their bank loan?" Clarabelle asked.

"I'm not interested in the Farnhams' bank business, as you very well know," Uncle George said. "Let's have a look in the safe."

"That's an invasion of very private property," Clarabelle said.

"Nonetheless." Uncle George outstared her.

Clarabelle reached up, turned the dial to the right, then to the left, then back to the right again. She glanced at Uncle George and then pulled the safe door open.

The first thing we saw was the awning-type-canvas bag the robber-murderer had carried. I remember hearing myself swear softly. I hadn't really believed Uncle George could be right.

"You becoming a believer, Hugh?" Uncle George asked me in a cold, hard voice.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. Clarabelle reached up, pulled the bag out of the safe, and tossed it to me. I caught it and held it, my hands shaking. Then she reached up again. When she turned to face us, she was holding the .45-caliber handgun she had used to murder Terry Martin.

"You outsmarted yourself, Mr. Crowder," she said. "You didn't believe I'd leave this very far out of my reach, did you?"

"I didn't think you'd *use* it," Uncle George said. "Fire a shot and that army out there will come charging in. Find one of us dead and they'll tear you apart."

"I don't intend to fire it, unless you insist on it," Clarabelle said. "That way, at least, you will have invited your own death. What

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we're going to do is walk out to the parking lot, you and Hugh and I. No one will stop us if you tell them not to. You will drive us in your car to some nice secluded place, and there you will decide whether you and Hugh want to live or not."

"That isn't the way it's going to be, Miss Clarabelle!" It was a high, shrill child's voice speaking from behind Clarabelle. "I have a rifle aimed at the back of your head. I was taught to use it by the greatest rifleman in the whole world, my Uncle George. I couldn't miss you if I wanted to. Drop your gun right now, or else!"

It had to be Joey. I looked past Clarabelle to the door behind her and I could see the dark shape of a gun barrel pointing at the back of her head through the crack in the door.

"Right now, Miss Clarabelle!" Joey said.

I could imagine what was going through Clarabelle Landis' head. If she fired at Uncle George, she could be dead before she could turn around. If she tried to turn and fire at Joey, she would never make it.

"Now! Drop the gun, Miss Clarabelle!"

"All right, all right!" Clarabelle threw out her hand and dropped the gun on the floor.

Uncle George literally dove for it and stood up with it aimed straight at her. "Boy!" he called out.

Joey Trimble walked in from the outer hall. He was carrying a mop, handle foremost.

"My God, boy," Uncle George said. He turned to me. "Get Red Egan and his men in here, Hugh."

When the whole crowd of partygoers and the State Police were in Clarabelle's office, I was the one who got to tell the story to them. I had seen Clarabelle handcuffed and didn't wish her well.

"A mop." The words drifted through the crowd.

"Judas Priest!" Tucker Lawson muttered. "A mop!"

"Wow," said one of the state troopers.

"The town ought to strike off a medal for you, Joey," Red Egan said.

"What he needs," said Uncle George, "is an Academy Award for Best Actor of the Year."

He smiled at the boy and reached a hand down to his shoulder. Looking at Joey, I knew that that hand on his shoulder was the only reward he would ever want.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Even these better days, collections of mystery short stories by a single author are relatively uncommon. And, until a short-story author has become established as a novelist and has "justified" the publisher risk, they are almost unknown.

That's the point Francis M. Nevins, Jr., makes in introducing *Better Mousetraps* (St. Martin's, $18.95) by his friend and fellow St. Louisian, John Lutz. Lutz is now well lodged as a novelist, with thirteen to his credit, but like many others he began with magazine short tales (he's published about 140 so far and continues to be active in the shorter form). In this generous collection, 35 tales illustrate Lutz's craft, his fondness for bizarre business enterprises and spouse-disposal plots. And Nevins provides an exhaustive checklist of Lutz's works. Very rewarding.

The Hermit of Eyton Forest (Mysterious Press, $15.95) is the fourteenth of Ellis Peters' tales of Brother Cadfael and Twelfth Century England. It's a beguiling tale, full of winsome characters and satisfying outcomes. On the larger stage, Empress Maud and King Stephen are contesting rule of the kingdom. On the Cadfael stage, a priest has arrived to take hermit residence in the nearby forest, a strong-willed woman wants to marry her grandson—age ten, studying at the Abbey, and without interest in matrimony—to a woman twice his age for land-merger purposes, a cruel landowner is raking over the countryside looking for a runaway slave, and a messenger of Maud's has disappeared. The conjunction of these matters provides death and much disruption to life at the Abbey, but shrewd Cadfael, wise in the ways of the external world, sorts it out.

Antonia Fraser's Jemima Shore, investigative reporter for British TV, comes to us again in *Your Royal Hostage* (Atheneum, $15.95). The winds of fortune being fickle, they have blown to Jemima the end of her starring role with Megalith Television. Rescue comes in the form of some Americans, who hire her to narrate coverage of a royal wedding. But some animal-rights activists, proclaiming nonviolence, have their beady eye on Princess Amy, thinking to snatch her for the benefit of furry creatures. Before we're through, murder's been done, with Jemima well engaged at the end. Not much plot here, not much of a role for Shore till that ending, but some snappy observations on the human species.

William G. Tapply's sixth case for Brady Coyne is *The Vulgar Boatman* (Scribners, $14.95), and it shows the Boston lawyer at his most human, leading with his chin, erring in judgment, endangering others. Client Tom Baron is running for governor. He's not of

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Coyne's political persuasion, but he is a friend. When Baron's son is wanted for the murder of his girl friend, when cocaine also lurks in the posh Baron town, Coyne agrees to help. He involves himself more deeply than he should, playing snoop, playing decoy. Playing just about dead. Accepting the Coyne frailties, this becomes a smashing tale.

This year's Dick Francis is *Hot Money* (Putnam, $17.95), not atop the Francis oeuvre, but a tense and engaging journey nonetheless. Malcolm Pembroke is fabulously adept at making money, though less successful with wives and children. Five of the former there have been, and the surviving three—the latest has been freshly murdered, case unsolved—lust passionately for a dip in the Pembroke millions. Even more, however, do his children, most of whom are in advanced stages of terminal desperation. All except Ian, who only wants to ride horses, and who Malcolm asks for help after the first attempt on his life. This Malcolm-Ian reconciliation (of sorts) adds terminal jealousy to the afflictions of Ian's siblings. Staying alive, finding something to keep Malcolm's mind off dying, figuring out who's got murder on his mind are all quite a challenge for Ian.

The Autumn Dead (St. Martin's, $14.95) by Ed Gorman brings back Jack Dwyer, agency rent-a-cop and sometime actor. Here he's mostly neither, serving more as an independent private eye when Karen Lane, the beauty he'd worshipped in his youth, reappears to ask for help. It seems she's misplaced a suitcase, and could Jack retrieve it from the home of her most recently discarded lover? This fairly simple request starts Dwyer down a trail of madness and death, in which he learns the dreadful dark side of people he likes—and of himself. Grim and telling.

Peter Israel, earlier author of a series of novels about B. F. Cage, a Paris-based investigator, returns after a criminous hiatus with *I'll Cry When I Kill You* (Mysterious Press, $15.95). Charles Camelot, New York attorney, is good enough to attract well heeled clients, and to earn enough income to easily support his various eccentricities. Raul Bashard, fabulously wealthy dean of science-fiction writers, calls on his lawyer to keep him alive: aside from the infirmities of his 79 years, Bashard is convinced someone wants to kill him. Success breeds hatred as well as reverence, and Bashard could be right. So to the walled Bashard estate goes Philip Neville, Goodwin to Camelot's Wolfe, to the near-impossible task of protecting a man who insists on attending a weekend fan celebration of his eightieth birthday. Complications include the nubile and unpredictable Grace Bashard, and the dying begins with a doberman named Jules Verne. Complex and intriguing, with a good twist at the end.

Paul Geddes brings back Ludovic Fender, now retired from British Intelligence, in *Goliath* (St. Martin's, $17.95). Mutual back scratching in high places produces an odd assignment for agent Mark

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Egerton: find Lauren Giordano, daughter of a rising politician and thought to be consorting with a Spanish terrorist. Lauren's trail is not difficult to follow, but Egerton attracts some unloving attention in the process. When the case turns deadly, Mark turns to Fender for help. Ludovic—obese, draped with peculiarities, intrigued by the games being played—does.

William F. Buckley, Jr., continues his postwar history lessons with *Mongoose R.I.P.* (Random House, $17.95). The C.I.A., it would appear from the official record, has entertained itself over the years with plots—imaginatively hatched but never remotely successful—to kill Fidel Castro. Here it's 1963 (you may recall a notable event which took place in Dallas that year), and Blackford Oakes is embroiled in the latest Cuban caper. While the current C.I.A. schemes are unraveling as usual, Castro and Oakes are concerned about missiles. Moscow's earlier pullout of its Cuban missiles—a retreat leaving Castro spitting with rage and courting China in revenge—seems to have been incomplete. Castro discovers the Russians left one missile behind, well but not well enough hidden, and Fidel knows just what might be done with it. If Oakes—on whom Castro had previously pronounced a death sentence—doesn't get in the way. Buckley pulls all this together effectively, if aridly.

Citadel Run (Tor, $17.95), a first novel by England-born L.A. police detective Paul Bishop, is a wild and fetching tale of antic L.A. cops. Jack Walker is only days away from thirty years and a pension, but that imposes no restraint. His fame lies partly in a historic race to Mexico and back during a single eight-hour tour of duty, and when he's challenged he and his beddable (and bedded) young woman partner put their careers—and his pension—on the line. This time it's a race to Vegas and back in supercharged police cars, to be accomplished without getting caught. There are a couple of complications: Walker's boss has a consuming thirst to can him at first sight of a misstep, and some folks are planning a fancy stickup of a Vegas casino at just about the same time.

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EDITORIAL NOTE: Please see page 137.

"Q"

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POE-TIC CORNER

HERE BE DRAGONS

by SAJAS

I once had a lavender dragon friend
Who roared at his terrible dreams,
But spent his days in gorging himself
On pickles and chocolate creams!

"Oh, why don't you eat some nourishing food?"
I asked him one day, riding by.
"This is my reason," he whispered to me,
As a tear escaped from his eye.

"I'd like some brave knight to come out and fight,
But none are willing to try it—
So in my dreams I have serpentine fights
Because of my dreadful diet!"

I reached in my pack and took from a sack
A small magazine I had found,
And gave it then to my dragonish friend,
Who laughed till he rolled on the ground.

"Oh, this is my cure," my dragon friend puffed,
"More precious to me than pure gold!
With *Ellery Queen* I'll have more fun
Than all of the dragons of old!"

So now he eats only dragonish food
Such as cattle and horses and dogs,
Then he reads whole bales of mystery tales
And sleeps even better than logs!

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DELI BLUES

by MARY E. DURHAM

Some bum went and stole my salami—
Made mincemeat from all my pastrami.
I'll catch that schlemiel
And make him a deal:
"Pay up—or it's curtains!" Signed: Mommie.

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OH, NO!

by NOLEN HARSH

Bart broke out of the pen—
But he didn't get very far.
He tried to hitch a ride
In the warden's car.

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NO PICKUP AT THE STICKUP

by VICTORIA HAWKINS

The big old bank was empty
Of customers one day
When in came four tough robbers
To take some cash away.
A tip put a detective
Behind the counter, too.
The robbers dropped their guns in shock
When he called out, "Guess who?"

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LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

by GEORGE W. TUDOR

A highwayman am I forsooth
When winter's mantle's thrown
And Lord and Lady's moved to town
And left me here alone.

Long, lonely seasons have I spent
Attending this estate
In fruit-bare orchards, gardens bleak,
A tenant farmer's fate.

By night, when winter's storm-tossed clouds
The pale moon's light revoke,
My horse I mount and skulk about
In highwayman's dark cloak.

Last night upon the King's Highway
A treasury I took,
A chest filled high with richest trade—
Three guards their lives forsook.

I lie here in the attic now,
My candle burning low.
The blood that's on the chest is mine—
Methinks a fatal blow.

With all these riches in my grasp,
These acres would be mine
And lavish dinners I would stage
With venison and wine.

He who finds my body here
A rich man shall you be—
I beg you, dig my grave close by
To spend eternity.

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a *NEW* short story by

LORRAINE COLLINS

Lily could fix the bird feeder before more tragedies happened, but other things were not so easily mended. She had certainly intended no harm when she first let Joshua Barker into the house . . .

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

by LORRAINE COLLINS

Living here in Spruce Canyon the last four years, in the log house my husband built long ago, I thought I had come to accept and understand what my own responsibility is in the scheme of things here. For instance, this morning I saw the red squirrel kill the little pine siskin who was eating at my bird feeder. I ran out, shouting at him, and even threw a rock at him, I was so angry and upset, but I didn't want to kill the squirrel for killing the bird. The bird, you see, was my responsibility.

By building the feeder in the first place, I brought a new element into the delicate balance of things here in Spruce Canyon. I invited the bird here, tempting it with sunflower seeds and thistle, and yet I knew the squirrel could climb up into the feeder—the piece of tin that had prevented him before had fallen to the ground. The squirrel was just being himself, doing what nature compelled him to do, when he fought the bird, and won.

I had created a trap for the bird, you see—unwillingly, wanting nothing more than to be hospitable, and to enjoy the company of little birds outside my window in the early-morning sun. But it was a sinister trap of my own devising, and I had to accept that fact, even though part of my mind said, well, all the other birds—the chickadees and nuthatches—flew away as soon as the squirrel

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climbed into the feeder. Only the siskin refused to be intimidated, refused to give up its rightful place, and stayed and fought. So we blame our victims for their own destruction.

I can fix the bird feeder before more tragedies happen, but other things are not so easily mended. I have worried about it, even as I try to excuse myself and say I certainly intended no harm when I first let Joshua Barker into our house.

He came knocking at our door one afternoon two weeks ago. We get very few visitors, so the sound of his big fist pounding on the door was startling, and at first unidentifiable. Then I realized what it was and opened the door—and there was Joshua, holding the cat in his arms.

"Is this your cat? He seems to be hurt," he said, and smiled that open, beguiling smile I soon learned to count on seeing every morning. The big orange striped cat tried to struggle out of his arms, but he held it tight. "His paw is hurt and he has some blood behind his ear. I found him lying beside the road. At first I was afraid he was dead, but—"

"Oh," I said, "poor Gypsy!" And I went out to them on the porch to see what the trouble was. "Thank you so much!"

We sat on the bench and looked at the cat's wounds, then I got some antiseptic and dabbed it wherever there was blood. Finally, the cat jumped down and limped off to take care of itself.

"Well, I guess he'll be okay." He smiled at me. "My name's Joshua Barker, by the way."

I said, "Hello. My name is Lily Bonner."

"Would you have a drink of water?" he said. "I saw a spring back there a mile or so, but I wasn't sure I should drink out of it. There were deer tracks all around."

I was pleased that he was here, glad of the company. I studied him a moment and decided to take the chance. "Would you like tea instead? I have sun tea. And I made cinnamon bread this morning."

"Sounds wonderful."

He shrugged out of his backpack and ran a hand through his shaggy red hair, rubbed his stubble of red beard, and stretched his legs out in front of him, sighing. He was making himself comfortable.

He looked around at the little garden we planted beside the house, and the short stretch of lawn leading to the tangle of undergrowth where aspen and hawthorn and oak share space with the evergreens. "You have a real nice summer place here."

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I brought him the iced tea in one of the tall crystal glasses we never use any more, and the bread on a little china plate. He sat up straighter. "Say, this is nice."

I sat on the bench. "This used to be just a summer place, but we live here year round now. It isn't terribly far to town, and the road is kept open most of the time in the winter. Unless there's a really bad storm."

"Boy, you're lucky to live in a place like this. Are you loggers—or miners? How do you get to live up here when the rest of us are condemned to civilization?"

I laughed, looking out over the lawn and trees with a bit of pride. "My husband is retired, so we don't have to worry about civilization."

"Retired?" His dark eyes studied me. "But you look too young to be retired."

I tried to see myself in his eyes, to imagine what it is I look like by now to a man who really looks—not the way the postal clerk sees me, or the boy carrying groceries to the car. For four years I've lived here with my sister Louise and my husband Charles, and I've almost forgotten what it's like to have a conversation with anybody else, to watch a man watching me. I'm not forty yet.

"My husband was disabled. An injury to the head. It's almost the same as a stroke, so he retired early and we came to live here. It's an old place, but very peaceful, and we can afford it. It's uncomplicated here."

"Well, you're lucky," he said again. He said he was a teacher, and he'd led a group of students on a field trip to study geology, but now that they were gone he was going to spend the rest of the summer hiking around the mountains, going where he pleased, enjoying the wonders of nature.

When the cat came back to the house to curl up near the porch in the sun, he watched it and said, "He must have been in a fight. I wonder if he came in first or last?" Again that innocent, cheerful smile.

"Gypsy isn't really our cat. Well, in a way she is. She's a spayed female and she was in Spruce Canyon before we were—five years at least. We don't know how old she is. Somebody must have dropped her off. She showed up around the summer cabins here, and people would feed her, so she stayed around. And when we came to live here all the time, she sort of adopted us."

I watched Gypsy peacefully licking her paw. "We feed her a little, once a day, but we can't let her in the house, it wouldn't be fair. So

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she's just half domesticated, I suppose." I frowned, worrying about the justice of it. "She has to be able to fend for herself, don't you think? Not depend entirely on us? She has a lot of natural hunting instincts and we shouldn't let her lose them."

Joshua seemed to think about it seriously. He finally said, "I suppose that's the right way to look at it. If you didn't care for her at all, she might just die. Or she might be totally wild by now, a feral cat. Dangerous to everybody in the forest."

Louise was coming up from the river, but she paused at the edge of the woods, staring at Joshua. She was wearing her swimsuit and sandals and carried a towel. When I saw her I waved, so she came on toward us, smiling. Joshua stood up when she came onto the porch, the way a gentleman should, a man with some civilized manners.

I said, "Louise, this is Joshua Barker—he just rescued poor Gypsy, who's been in a fight."

"Oh, no! Is she all right now?"

"I think so. She's on the other side of the porch."

Joshua watched her as she went over to look down at the cat sunning herself. I couldn't blame him for watching her. Louise always was a very beautiful girl—ten years younger than I am and with the sort of natural grace you see in some people, moving as unselfconsciously as a bird or a squirrel, or the deer that come through our yard to nibble at the tips of the young apple trees, taking everything as it is found, as natural as breathing.

She turned to smile at him. "Are you staying for supper?"

It happened very casually and I didn't give it enough thought.

There were things that needed doing—splitting wood for the fireplace, mending some fence around the garden, clearing a better path to the river, changing the oil in the station wagon, washing windows, hacking through the grass and weeds that were encroaching on our driveway. It was very nice to have someone to help us with these, and Joshua was very pleased to have a place to stay for a little while.

When I brought him in to meet Charles, Joshua smiled very pleasantly, and sat down so he wouldn't tower over poor Charles, who sits all day in his wheelchair, mute and confused and angry. Charles isn't very big any more, and I can handle him alone, but it was a great relief to have Joshua to lift him up, help him into the bath, and shave him. I knew Charles hated it, but it had been four years, and I was tired.

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Some evenings when I was sitting with Charles in the living room, I'd hear Joshua and Louise talking on the porch and he'd say, "You mean you've lived here all this time? Don't you get bored? Don't you ever want to move to town and have your own life? I know your sister needs your help, but I think you should look after yourself, too."

And I'd wait to hear what Louise answered. She would laugh and turn it aside. "No, I like it here, really," she'd say at first. But later she said, "I do miss some things, but Lily needs me here. She couldn't manage alone."

"It seems to me Charles should be in a nursing home," Joshua said last night. "And Lily could go on with her life, too. Is she going to keep this up forever?"

There was a little pause. I could imagine Louise frowning, concentrating, asking herself, *Can* Lily keep this up forever? Then she laughed again. "Oh, no. Just for a while—just until she can decide what to do. We left Mayfield as soon as Charles could leave the hospital, and she didn't have time to decide. She said she had to think." I heard the sound of her giggle. "So she's been thinking!" Then there was one of those interesting silences and I heard her say, "I don't think you should do that, Joshua."

So I brought lemonade out onto the porch and sat with them after that. Then I said, "Joshua, we've appreciated your help, but I don't want to detain you any longer."

He said, "That's all right, Lily. I've appreciated being here."

"Yes, that's fine, but tomorrow I think it would be best for you to go."

He sat up straight, looking at me with an amused tolerance. "I'd planned to finish that path by the river tomorrow. Could I stay long enough to do that? I'd like to leave you in good shape here."

"No," I persisted. "I'd rather you didn't stay another day."

He turned to look at Louise. "What do you think?"

I stood up. "Never mind what she thinks. Just do what I ask." I looked at him very seriously. "Please."

"Let's see in the morning, okay?"

I turned to leave because I heard the sound that meant Charles wanted me. It's not a groan and not a cry, but something in between, and the best he can do. I hadn't pushed him out to join us on the porch because it agitated him so. I wasn't sure he really remembered Louise, but he tended to get upset around her and I found it best to

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wait until she was swimming in the river or working in the garden behind the house to bring him out for some sun and air.

Charles was always a very angry man, and he used to be hard on me sometimes. He used to be angry with me for no reason at all. After the blow on the head that left him mute and partially paralyzed, he kept his anger but he couldn't focus on any one cause of it. It's just part of him, like his heartbeat, an anger that has no expression but the fury in his eyes.

At first we weren't sure what he would remember, or whether he would ever regain his speech again, and I thought, well, we had better wait and see. But it appears now that he's locked in this condition forever. Wondering and waiting, I hadn't realized it was such a long time. I've grown used to watching the seasons the way others watch the clock.

But four years *is* a long time, and what Joshua said was true. Charles *should* be cared for by someone else, and I *should* go about my own life and let Louise go whatever way she would. I'd done my duty, I couldn't go on doing this forever.

Last night I began to think it was possible, that it was safe, and a natural thing to do. What a seductive idea it was, to be free. I thought that Joshua would leave, and then the three of us would leave, all scattering in different directions, like leaves blown by the wind.

And I still thought so this morning when Joshua smiled and said goodbye and took his backpack and walked toward the road. It was such a relief to see him go, I felt a bubble of happiness inside all morning, even after the trouble with the squirrel. By noon I had made up my mind, and I went down to the river, where Louise had gone, to tell her it was safe now, and we could leave this stagnant life here.

But as I rounded the last bend in the path, I saw them there, Joshua and Louise lying together.

I knew what she would say. She would say, "He hurt me, Lily! He made me do it, Lily, he did terrible things to me!" She said that when she was seventeen about the Bradley boy, and I brought her home sobbing. I couldn't tell Daddy what had happened, and I couldn't comfort her at all until she said, "He has to pay for this, Lily, he has to pay! I can't live otherwise!" She was hysterical and ran from the house.

I followed her back to where that drunken boy was lying by the canal. She screamed, "There he is! There he is!" She screamed so

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loud I was afraid everybody would hear. So I said, "All right, all right, we'll teach him a lesson." And I rolled him into the water. I didn't know he would drown.

When she was twenty, Louise called me from a phone booth at a motel about Roger Marshall and what terrible things he'd done. I went there and brought her home, without asking where Roger was. They found him the next morning.

I shouldn't have brought her in. I should have known I was doing nothing more than setting a trap for Charles, for all of us. But she was so sweet and loving and grateful. Yet I knew my husband's nature—he had other women before. I should have known what would happen.

Afterward, she hated him. She really hated him. Which surprised me—if anyone should have hated him, it should have been me.

I happened to come in before she'd struck more than that single, devastating blow, as he lay there on her bed. And I've wondered whether that was a benefit to any of us. She cried and clung to me, begging for help and promising not to tell anyone what I did to the Bradley boy or how I helped her leave Roger Marshall to bleed to death if I'd help her this one last time.

When I found Joshua and Louise today, I wondered what I should think, what I should do. Louise would be very angry with him, I knew that. But I couldn't bring myself to walk in on that scene, the way I had with her and Charles.

Not again. I couldn't do it again. I have my limits, too. After all, I had told Joshua to go. I had said please go. He chose to stay.

I turned away and came back to the house.

All these four years I've lived here, protecting Louise from the world and the world from Louise. I sat on the porch, watching Gypsy lying in the sun, still licking her paw. Cats are good at caring for themselves, healing themselves. Watching her, I began to realize my mistake. I must just let nature take its course. I should not interfere any more. If I hadn't interfered with Charles, he'd be dead today. But I stopped her, I deflected her blows—I threw her to the floor, I was so angry. But Charles has no life left, nor have I.

I should never have done that. Louise is who she is. But now, perhaps, in my own interests, I should act, as all other creatures in the forest do, thinking of no needs but their own. That's what I

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thought before I walked back to the river, to see whatever I would see.

Joshua was floating just a bit underwater in the deep pool by the rocks and Louise was lying on the bank, curled up in the sunshine like Gypsy.

"Oh, hello, Lily," she said with that dreamy smile I've seen before. "Oh, it was terrible—he did terrible things to me."

"I know," I said. "But don't worry about it, dear, I'll take care of it." As I took care of the others, as I've taken care of Charles and you for these last four years. And I thought of poor Gypsy and how it might be a mistake to try to force an animal to be half domesticated, half wild—not able to live entirely in one world or the other. It would be a kindness to stop feeding Gypsy, to stop feeding the birds, who must survive whether I was here or not. I was sure they would survive without me. Of Louise, I was not so sure.

"Oh, look," I said. "See the downy woodpecker in the tree—*there!*" And she turned to look, leaning over the dark water.

This morning I couldn't kill the squirrel for doing what was natural to him. This afternoon, I could.

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a *NEW* Ambrose Ganelon story by

JAMES POWELL

Regis Soufflot entered, carrying a large bowl and a pitcher of hot water. The small-boned man with the insignificant moustache had become the best in his field on Ganelon's wedding day, for the detective's wife had brought as her dowry her promise to give up her life as the *jewel thief of Europe. Since then, Soufflot had gone to work for Duhamel Fong, finding it more profitable and challenging to steal those things the arch-villain wanted stolen. "Enjoy your wash-up," said Soufflot. "Drinks before dinner in twenty minutes."*

A splendid story, the first in too long, about one of the four generations of Ganelons, Ambrose Ganelon II . . .

THE CEREBUS EMERALD

by JAMES POWELL

One late afternoon in the autumn of 1901, a train slid into the station of a decrepit factory town about thirty minutes south of Paris. St.-Didier was one of those communities that turn a particularly dreary side to the railway tracks. A tall, elegantly dressed man with noticeable ears and large hands and feet sighed and rose to take his valise from the luggage rack. Well, we must take our treachery where we find it, thought Ambrose Ganelon, the second master detective to bear that name.

Major Adamastor Reeves was waiting to greet him as Ganelon stepped down from the train. Corpulent, his face as round and red as that month's moon, Reeves sported the full wide moustache the English call a mudguard. A tweed jacket and preposterous check knickerbockers added to the man's harmless appearance. In fact,

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Reeves was one of the top lieutenants of Duhamel Fong, the most dangerous man in Europe.

Even before Reeves contacted him to suggest a meeting, Ganelon had been hearing stories of discontent in the Fong camp. And of something called The Cerebus Emerald. ("*A* Cerebus emerald, darling," Ganelon's wife had corrected him. She had been packing for another of her trips to oversee the security of a jewel collection newly insured by the consortium which kept her on retainer. "Yes, I've heard of them. No, I've never seen one. I understand it's much like the Arabian art of killing your enemy by adding a ground-up diamond to his food. The better the stone, the greater the victim suffers before he dies."

She stood back from the last bag to let him do the strapping-up. "Cerebus emeralds occasionally show up at estate auctions," she continued. "The people who follow such things say the funerals are invariably closed-coffin affairs." Then, as he followed her down the staircase with the luggage, she looked back over her shoulder and added, "I think Oscar Wilde speaks of a Cerebus emerald somewhere. Or was it Mr. Yeats?")

Ganelon accompanied Reeves out onto the street where a light carriage was waiting. The Englishman swung himself up into the seat and picked up the reins. Ganelon took a place beside him, setting the valise on the floor between his legs. As the carriage headed out of town, Ganelon looked back to see if they were being followed. He half suspected a trap. He'd fallen into Fong's hands once before and had been left hanging by his wrists over a pit of deadly scorpions. He shuddered now, remembering the horror as his weight stretched the wet rawhide from which he hung, inching him toward certain death.

Thank God for old Father Titus, the monk of the Order of Saint Magnus to whom Ganelon's father, the founder of the Ganelon Agency, skeptic though he was on matters of religion, had sent him as a boy for training in the Christian martial arts. One day between classes, the old priest had surprised his pupil smoking an illegal roll-your-own. But instead of a reproach, Father Titus had sat down beside him, asked for a cigarette paper, and, laying it against his humming lips, taught the boy a tune he called "The Scorpion Galop," an infectious quickstep which, the venerable priest swore, would charm a nest of scorpions into pairing up in a frantic dance, at the end of which partner would salute partner with a fatal sting. By swinging his legs up over his head and wrapping them in the sagging

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rawhide, Ganelon took enough tension from his bound wrists so he could get to his cigarette case. "The Scorpion Galop" had done the rest.

Reeves' house lay just beyond the edge of town, behind a high wall that stood flush with the road. The horse took the narrow gate coolly and at a fast clip. At the end of the short driveway sat the house itself, a two-story building named from the now faded color of its stucco walls. The Villa Rose. Many a young Englishman or American of good family or fortune visiting France for the first time back in the Seventies and Eighties had learned to curse that name. They usually made the acquaintance of its owner, Adamastor Reeves, in a Paris cafe along the city's more fashionable boulevards during the "green" hour, those happy moments between five and six when the absinthe lay clouded in the glass. When he had won their confidence, Reeves, the older man of the world, would offer to be their guide to the pleasures of the city. Later he would even volunteer the use of the Villa Rose for their encounters of passion. It was clear from his revealing collection of photographs—his secret cameras were quite up-to-date—that few refused his offer.

Duhamel Fong respected Reeves less for his blackmailing skills than for the genuine pleasure the man took in driving people to the wall. Once recruited into Fong's organization, Reeves was obliged to return any compromising material, negatives and all, to his victims, along with a letter telling of his religious conversion and his intention to sail for China to atone for his sins by working among the heathens. No sudden apparition from Reeves' past was to complicate any of Fong's grand designs.

The thin man waiting with awkward limbs and narrow wolfish look on the front walk was the financial genius, Manfred Beck. "Beck will show you to your room," said Reeves. "We are alone here, we four, and I must attend to the horse myself."

Waving away the long fingers that reached for his valise, Ganelon followed Beck's narrow back into the house and up a flight of stairs covered with a red Turkey runner. Beck had come to Fong's attention while still a student at one of Vienna's better ateliers. The evil genius read the artist's character well. He would later pay the critics those small amounts that would withhold from Beck the acclaim his abilities as an engraver should have earned him. Embittered, Beck turned to counterfeiting with such success that he unwittingly brought about the financial crisis of 1874 in which he himself suffered substantial losses. As a result, he gave over the next several

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years to a study of the international monetary system. By the time he came to work for Fong he was a master of currency manipulation.

"This is your room, Mr. Ganelon," grinned Beck when they reached the door at the head of the stairs. "Soufflot has kitchen detail. He'll bring you hot water. I must now go and select the wine worthy of so famous a guest." Still grinning like a wolf, Beck closed the door.

The detective looked around at the room and its dark, heavy, and quite unremarkable furniture. He set his valise on the bed but did not open it. In the home of a blackmailer you never knew when you were being observed. Pretending to admire and straighten the pictures on the walls, Ganelon began a closer examination of the room. He found the peephole in one of the doors of the large armoire against an interior wall. This mighty piece of furniture rested on what were called "sugar-beet feet," a feature which came briefly into style just after Napoleon introduced that useful root crop into France when the British blockade barred sugar from the Continent.

Pretending to admire the piece long enough to give anyone inside time to make his escape, Ganelon pulled open the doors. The armoire was empty, the floor dusty. Ganelon was about to conclude that peepholes were not a part of Reeves' plan tonight when he noticed the sawdust and discovered a second hole drilled in the other door. One hole he could understand. After all, it was a blackmailer's house. But why two, and the second one new? As he pondered this, there was a knock on the door.

Regis Soufflot entered, carrying a large bowl and a pitcher of hot water. This small-boned man with the insignificant moustache had become the best in his field on Ganelon's wedding day, for the detective's wife had brought as her dowry her promise to give up her life as *the* jewel thief of Europe. Since then, Soufflot had gone to work for Fong, finding it more profitable and challenging to steal those things the arch-villain wanted stolen. "Enjoy your wash-up," said Soufflot. "Drinks before dinner in twenty minutes."

Ganelon had reason to be wary of all this hospitality. Before their association with Fong, each of his hosts had tried to practice his nefarious occupation in San Sebastiano, whose guardian the Ganelons were. As a result, each was a graduate of the tiny principality's Duranceville Prison. Nevertheless, the detective didn't want to underestimate them. None of Fong's lieutenants had ever lasted as long as these three. The arch-criminal always disposed of his underlings before they became a threat. Ganelon's sources told him that in recent months Fong had moved against these men several

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times, but each attempt had been thwarted in one strange way or another.

His washing complete, Ganelon found a fresh shirt and a brighter tie in his valise. His wife's pretty little automatic was there as well. She had insisted he take it when she'd learned where he was going. Small as the weapon looked in his large hand, he had good reason to remember its effectiveness, for when the weather was damp his shoulder still ached from the bullet she'd placed there back in her criminal days. Ganelon left the automatic where it was. The fresh peephole suggested that whatever was going to happen would happen back here in the room.

Ganelon's three hosts rose to greet him, getting up from living-room furniture that looked as though it had been picked up for centimes on the franc from a bankrupt brothel. Evidently Reeves' view of amorous meetings was as defective as his sense of economy was strong. Each man had a drink in hand and the air was blue with tobacco smoke. Ganelon's choice was a brandy and soda. The gazogene and the decanters stood on a cart at Reeves' elbow.

Ganelon didn't bother to watch his drink's making. At his first tilt of the glass, he only allowed the contents to touch his lips. Then he dabbed his mouth with his pocket handkerchief. Back home in his second-floor laboratory at 18 bis rue Blondin in San Sebastiano, he had treated the linen with a solution of his own devising. Any drug or poison in the drink would have turned the linen an appropriate color. Ganelon relaxed and sat back in his chair. His companions were in a jolly mood. Had their master been within miles of the place they would have had hunched and servile looks.

Reeves seemed pleased with himself. "I imagine you're wondering why we're going to put Ledger Two in your hands," he beamed.

Ganelon admitted to a certain curiosity, the ledger in question being a list of the names of Fong's hidden agents in government, industry, and the professions throughout the world.

"Fong's empire has grown too big for one man to handle, you see," added Soufflot.

"So we're going to do him a favor," said Beck with a fine show of teeth. "We've decided to form a partnership, carve out a nice little piece of Fong's operation, and go into business for ourselves."

"But it's never wise to underestimate Duhamel Fong, is it?" said Reeves. "We'd prefer he had his hands full when we make our move. That's where you come in. We'll give you Ledger Two. You will take

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it to the proper authorities, those who haven't been touched by Fong's long reach. But we want your guarantee they won't act on this information until the day and hour we specify. They won't have to wait long, we promise. In the chaos, while the police around the world swoop down on the Ledger Two people, we will strike." Reeves smiled. Beck and Soufflot joined in.

Rumors or no rumors, it was hard for Ganelon to believe these three stood any chance of separating Fong from the smallest part of his empire of crime. Reeves, Beck, and Soufflot were bound to pay for this treachery with their lives. But wouldn't it be something if between here and the grave they could get possession of Ledger Two? In Ganelon's hands, the information might just prove fatal to Fong's entire operation. "You have my guarantee," said the detective.

"Excellent," said Reeves. "Then why don't we go to the table?"

The meal was cold ham and beef with an endive salad, and fruit and cheese and a good wine all spread out on a white tablecloth. As he ate, Ganelon eyed the exotic dagger hanging in its scabbard over the dining-room mantel, guessing it to be something from Fong's private collection. Ganelon's adversary often rewarded henchmen with such presents. This was one of those daggers called "The Edge That Deals the Never-Healing Wound." It would, he knew, have a curiously twisted blade which, in the cursive script of the land it came from, reads "Death."

As they started the third bottle of wine, it amused Ganelon to ask the table, "And will yours be an equal partnership?"

"Naturally," said Reeves. "But of course I will be the first among equals since only I have the power to keep Fong at bay." He looked at Beck and Soufflot, who nodded grudgingly. Then he stared down at his wine glass, turning it round and round by the stem. "Do you believe in magic, Mr. Ganelon?" he asked slyly, knowing the detective did not.

Ganelon answered with a firm shake of the head. Then he said, "But I understand the subject is a hobby of yours."

"More than a hobby. Much more," insisted Reeves. "I've made this difficult study the work of my later years. The truths of magic have been hidden from us like needles scattered in haystacks. Amid much superstition and nonsense are buried a few real powers, amid many fantastic stories a small body of truth. How else do you think my partners and I are still alive? Fong can't touch us because we wear

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powerful talismans, prepared according to my specifications by the Dark Sisters of Thrace."

"Tell about the amulet," said Soufflot.

Reeves chuckled to himself. "Fong likes to concoct his schemes at his desk in the library with the great atlas of the world open before him. I purchased a befuddling amulet of great price from the Dwarf of Antwerp and slipped it inside the spine of that damned book of his. Fong hasn't figured out what we're up to because the amulet keeps him from thinking straight."

"Tell him about The Cerebus Emerald," said Beck, grinning like an animal.

Soufflot choked on his wine. Reeves frowned. Then he cleared his throat and rearranged his face into a pleasanter shape. "All right, Beck, I will. Even though I know he doesn't believe in such things. You see, Mr. Ganelon, if Fong resists us, we'll destroy him with a Cerebus emerald."

"A flawless stone," said Soufflot hoarsely.

"Engraved with the image of Charon's pet," added Beck. "Cerebus, the Three-Headed Hound of Hades who stands guard at the spot where the Boatman of the Styx unloads his miserable human cargo."

"This jewel," continued Reeves, "is placed in the well of an oil lamp. The lamp is then lit at some eternal flame, such as a cenotaph or a sanctuary lamp. Next you carry the lamp into a dark room where your enemy waits for you. Before your very eyes, two hideous heads burst from the man's shoulders close to the base of the neck, and, snarling and slavering like wild, raging beasts, they will fall to, ripping and biting at the head of your victim with merciless teeth, until he, maddened by pain and horror, becomes a wild animal himself and begins to howl and fight back, bite for bite. Yes, while you watch, your enemy will destroy himself in a dogfight straight from Hell."

The three men turned to look at each other with happy, dreaming eyes, transfixed by the enjoyment of the same terrible vision.

"That's all very gratifying, I'm sure," said Ganelon impatiently, almost convinced his trip had been a waste of time, "but what about Ledger Two? Where is it?"

Giving Ganelon a haughty look, Reeves pulled out his pocket watch. "At this precise moment it's in a carriage heading in our direction at a fast rate of speed. We can expect it within the hour. The whole thing has been worked out with care. At eight o'clock this evening, Fong and his Turkish bodyguard Mehmet, old He Who

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Never Sleeps himself, left Fong's apartment in Paris to run a little crosstown errand we cooked up for them. One of Soufflot's people immediately lowered himself down from the roof and entered through a window which I left unlatched when I visited Fong this morning."

Soufflot nodded and took up the story. "I gave my man five minutes to get inside the wall safe, and another five to photograph the contents of the ledger and return it to the safe. His carriage is a traveling darkroom. He'll develop the film en route so you'll know what you're getting."

Here Reeves got to his feet. "My partners and I have business matters to discuss, Mr. Ganelon. Would you mind waiting for the arrival of Ledger Two in your room?"

Ganelon switched on the electric light and stood stock still as Reeves' heavy footstep faded away down the stairs. Then he heard a silent returning tread and the scrape of the key turning in the lock. Ganelon didn't know why he was being locked in his room. But he did know he was going to have to wait for another opportunity to get his hands on Ledger Two.

Several years back, while visiting Constantinople to frustrate another of Fong's dark designs and settle an old score or two, the detective had found himself with a free afternoon and decided to confirm an old suspicion about Mehmet, He Who Never Sleeps. As he'd half expected, the record of Mehmet's birth indicated the existence of a twin brother, Eyoub. So Fong had twin bodyguards. Soufflot's man would be dealt with by whichever one was left behind in Fong's apartment. So that was that. But for Ganelon, the real mystery was why Duhamel Fong had allowed the three men downstairs with their cargo of talismans and amulets and Cerebus emeralds to survive as long as he had.

So that his trip wouldn't be a complete waste, Ganelon decided to see what information he could gather by eavesdropping on his hosts. He took his wife's automatic from his valise and stepped up inside the armoire. With the doors ajar, there was enough light for him to find the spring that opened the panel in the back. Stepping through, he found himself inside another armoire, one that he shared with a dusty photographic tripod. He was facing a door with a peephole in it. He pushed the doors cautiously and was not surprised to find they opened out into a room much like the one he'd just left. Suddenly the electric light went out behind him. After a dark moment, he

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heard feet pounding up the stairs, stopping halfway. Reeves shouted, "Nothing to worry about, Mr. Ganelon! Just a power outage! We'll have a light up to you in no time!" Then the feet went back down the stairs.

Ganelon felt his way through the second bedroom and out into the hallway. He stood leaning over the stairwell, trying to make out the whispering below. Suddenly a louder voice, Beck's he thought, said, "The carriage!"

The door to the room across the hall was unlocked. Ganelon stepped inside and crossed to the french windows that looked out onto the driveway and opened them a crack.

A carriage drawn by two horses had pulled up at the door with a large man in the box beside the driver. A light showed around the edges of the vehicle's drawn leather curtains. The coachman jumped down and opened the door, spilling a rhomboid of light out onto the cobblestones. Then a figure, a silhouette Ganelon would recognize anywhere, stepped down from the carriage carrying a lighted oil lamp. With quick strides, Duhamel Fong entered the house. The closing door snuffed out the light. By leaning out into the darkness Ganelon could see it reappear to illuminate the windows of the living room where his hosts had gathered.

Now Mehmet-Eyoub got down from the box and went to the rear of the carriage. The large man unlaced the boot cover and pulled out something the size of a human body. This burden the Turk dragged into the bushes beside the front door. Then he got back up onto the box. A moment later, Fong emerged empty-handed from the house and started to get into the carriage. But then he stopped, turned, and looked up at the dark window of the Villa Rose where Ganelon stood. As the detective watched, Fong raised his hat several inches as if greeting an acquaintance on the street. Then he stepped up into the carriage, which clattered down the driveway and out the gate.

Ganelon didn't have time to puzzle out that tip of the hat. He suspected he was about to get a dose of voodoo. Deciding to meet it in his room, he quickly returned the way he had come. He closed the secret panel and the armoire doors behind him and waited in the darkness, holding his wife's automatic behind his back. After a minute or two, he heard noises inside the armoire that suggested his audience had manned the peepholes. Next came a step in the hall and a silent turning of the key in the lock. Then there was a

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knock and Reeves asked most agreeably, "I've brought your light, Mr. Ganelon."

"Come in," said the detective.

The door swung open and light rushed into the room. Adamastor Reeves stood on the threshold holding a quite ordinary oil lamp with a frosted chimney and a plain glass reservoir with a greenish tint, whose origin Ganelon suspected he knew. The only thing mysterious about this whole charade was why Fong, no man to believe in Cerebus emeralds, had involved himself in it.

Reeves hesitated on the threshold, beaming with unalloyed pleasure. He seemed to be holding himself back, as though afraid he might gulp his pleasure too quickly. Then he took a deep breath and stepped into the room, his eyes fixed on Ganelon's face.

He waited like that for almost a full minute. His smile wavered and then grew strong again. He stepped closer and held up the lamp so that its light fell fully on Ganelon's head and shoulders.

Ganelon allowed the man a few moments longer. Then he said, "Thank you. Just put it over there on the table."

Reeves' face fell like that of a child denied some long-expected treat. But in the next instant he was Fong's lieutenant again. Glaring down at the lamp in his hand, he cursed and backed out into the hall, slamming the door and locking it loudly. Ganelon heard a click as the panel in the back of the armoire closed. The audience had left, perhaps to demand its money back.

That was one conversation Ganelon didn't want to miss. He felt his way through the darkness to the armoire and from there to the room next door and out into the hall. As he reached the foot of the staircase, the electric lights came on again. The living room was empty, but Ganelon could hear voices arguing beyond the dining-room door, which stood ajar. He crossed the rug noiselessly.

Through the crack between door and doorjamb, Ganelon could see the oil lamp flickering amid the dinner dishes on the table and Beck, who had Reeves backed up against the mantel with a pistol to the Englishman's throat. "I don't know what went wrong," croaked Reeves, wide-eyed with fear. "I swear I've seen the Cerebus thing work. In Sicily in 'eighty-three. It was a terrible sight." Quickly his voice became a whisper. "Maybe the emerald was a fake."

"You mean I don't know my business?" demanded a new voice. By changing his position, Ganelon could see Soufflot's angry face. The man was in his shirtsleeves, no doubt fresh from replacing the electric fuse in the basement. Ganelon saw the glass chimney hurl

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through the air and heard it smash against the wall. Then he saw Soufflot snuff out the flame with the palm of his hand and unscrew the wick-holder. He fished around in the oil reservoir until he brought up an emerald. Wiping the jewel on a table napkin, he crossed to the other two and displayed it under their noses. The three heads looked at the stone. Then Soufflot gave a curse. "Beck, you greedy bastard," he shouted, "this stone's third-rate! It's not the one I gave you!"

Beck turned his pistol on Soufflot and snatched the emerald from his fingers. "Look at that joke of a Cerebus," he cried, his mouth wet with rage. "That's not my work. This isn't what I gave Reeves to take to—"

But here Reeves reached up and drew the dagger with the blade that reads "Death" from its scabbard and plunged it into Beck's back, wrenching it free again as the body fell to the floor. Soufflot jumped back as Reeves advanced toward him with the knife. "He lies," said the Englishman in a grim voice. "That's the same stone I delivered this morning. I saw Fong take it from the box."

"Hold it," said Soufflot quickly and urgently as he backed around the table. "Fong could've palmed my stone and shown you this one!"

"What if he had?" demanded Reeves. "The heads would still have appeared. Ganelon's death would have been faster and less painful, that's all." Now his eyes went sly with discovery. "Suppose Fong suspected something. And he didn't take the lamp to the Invalides to light it? He just drove his carriage around the block and returned to his apartment to catch your man at the wall safe. That's why the Cerebus emerald didn't work its magic." Reeves crouched and feinted with the knife.

Soufflot had backed around to his jacket, draped on a chair. He grabbed it as he passed as if he meant to wrap it around his forearm to ward off the wicked blade.

"Let's not drag this out," said Reeves, slashing designs in the air with the dagger. "I have to get to Fong before he realizes my involvement. Yes, I'll come to him carrying your head and Beck's, one on each shoulder, a living Cerebus myself. Fong is amused by macabre little jokes of that sort. I'll tell him I caught you two plotting Ledger Two treachery with his nemesis, Ambrose—"

Soufflot fired without taking the pistol out of his jacket pocket. The bullet hit Reeves squarely in the chest.

The shot jolted Ganelon into action. Before Reeves' body had hit the floor, he stepped from his hiding place. But Soufflot must have

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seen the glint of the silver barrel through the crack in the door. He was waiting with his pistol pointed at the detective's head before Ganelon could get his weapon in play. "Dead is dead, Mr. Ganelon," he said, "whether it's by Cerebus emerald or a bit of lead. I bet Fong could forgive a lot from a man who brings him the stinking carcass of a Ganelon."

But the shot that Ganelon expected did not come from Soufflot. Dying, Reeves had found Beck's gun on the floor and, hooking an elbow over the edge of the table, pulled himself up and shot Soufflot in the back. Then both dead men and all that was on the tablecloth hit the floor in the same loud moment.

Ganelon straightened his tie in the absent-minded way he did when he'd been overtaken by events. Then he picked his way through the carnage and out into the kitchen, where he made himself a cup of strong coffee, which he drank standing up. A bloody business. But when you came right down to it, it was just another falling out among criminals. The detective set down the cup and looked at his watch. It would be six hours before the next train back to Paris. He took a cab to the Gare de Lyon. From there, just before boarding *La Fleche de l'Ardeche*, the morning express to San Sebastiano, he telephoned a friend at the Surete and told him about the carnage at the Villa Rose, including the fourth body, the one deposited there by Mehmet. It was, he was sure, Soufflot's man sent to steal Ledger Two, for both hands had been amputated and stuffed into the man's trouser pockets. Nor did Ganelon forget to remind his friend to take care of the horse standing outside the railway station.

Ganelon saved the story of that night's events for the short vacation that preceded Christmas exams, when his son, the third to bear the name Ambrose Ganelon, would be home from school. Then he related it one evening at the dinner table, intending the adventure to entertain his wife and give the boy another demonstration of the foolishness of magic and like forms of mumbo-jumbo.

As he concluded the story, it seemed to him he'd made his point with his son. But his wife heard it all with a beautiful and disquieting coolness. When she told their son, "Ambrose, if you're finished you may leave the table," Ganelon's concern increased. His wife made it a practice never to disagree with him in front of the boy.

When their son had risen dutifully, pushed in his chair, and left the room, Madame Ganelon turned to her husband. "My darling," she said, "you really are becoming terribly self-centered. It's clear

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to me that you were only a side show in this particular circus. It amused Duhamel Fong to use a Cerebus emerald to kill his three lieutenants—or, rather, have them kill each other. I'm afraid you were just along to be his—oh, what?—his amulet of befuddlement." Raising her voice so that their son, who was listening at the door, would be warned of their coming, she asked, "Shall I pour coffee in the sitting room?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course, dear," said Ganelon absently. But he sat back down after his wife left the table, his large ears burning. She was quite right, of course. Fong's little tip of the hat up to the dark window at the Villa Rose had been his arch-enemy thanking him for his help in disposing of his three rebellious lieutenants. Ganelon cursed himself under his breath. How far had he been used? he wondered. Had Fong, for example, intended him to rush in when he had to distract Soufflot so the fatally wounded Reeves could get off that final shot?

Ganelon thought for a moment. Then he shook his head and got up from the table to join his wife. No, not even Fong played that many moves ahead.

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Gerry was determined that the police should not hear about the newer model, because he had no intention of Sandra's death being treated as a case of murder. Everyone knew who the first suspect was when a wife or husband was murdered. No, Sandra was not going to be murdered. Sandra was going to have an accident. Or commit suicide . . .

MORE FINAL THAN DIVORCE

by ROBERT BARNARD

Gerry Porter had no desire to murder his wife, he would much have preferred simply to trade her in for a new model. But Gerry was a businessman and he knew how to do his sums. He totted up the value of his butchery business, of their house and two cars, of the time-share villa in Spain. He knew it was no longer a question simply of paying her a pittance as alimony—the judge would award his wife a substantial proportion of the marital estate. Every way he looked at it, it was impossible for him to keep his business, a roof over his head, and a new wife. He sighed. It would have to be something more final than divorce. It would have to be murder. Personally, he told himself, he blamed these feminists. If it hadn't been for the new divorce laws, Sandra would be alive today.

Well, actually Sandra *was* alive today. That was, of course, the problem. He didn't think Sandra had any suspicions about the newer model, but the moment she did she'd tell her friends, and therein would lie the main danger. Gerry was determined that the police should not hear about the newer model, because he had no intention of Sandra's death being treated as a case of murder. Everyone knew who the first suspect was when a wife or husband was murdered.

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No, Sandra was not going to be murdered. Sandra was going to have an accident. Or commit suicide.

Gerry went about it in a methodical way. There were always plenty of newspapers around his butcher's shop as wrapping, and between customers he studied them avidly. Plenty of people did die by accident, and the inquests on them were reported in the local rag. Gerry began classifying them in his mind into road accidents, domestic accidents, and accidents at work. The last category was out, since Sandra did not go to work. The first category was large, and encompassed many different kinds of death in or under motor vehicles. Gerry did notice how many people seemed to die on holiday abroad, and he toyed with the idea of getting some Spaniard to run into her car or run her down on some particularly dangerous stretch of Iberian road. But the thought of being in the power of some foreigner made him go off the idea. And the more he read about the advances in forensic science, the less inclined he felt to tamper with his wife's car.

And the more he thought about it, the same objection seemed to apply to domestic accidents. People did electrocute themselves—some even apparently perched electric fires on the ends of their baths. (God, what ignorant bastards people were!) But the Porters had central heating, and Gerry doubted his ability to render their high-speed kettle lethal in a way that would fool Forensics.

Gerry was sent off onto another tack entirely one evening when he passed the living room while his wife was having coffee with a friend and heard her say: "Oh, Lord, the Change! There are times I wonder if I'll ever get through it."

Gerry was a heavy man, with heavy footsteps, and he couldn't stop to hear any more. Sandra, in fact, went on to say that luckily she now seemed to be over the worst. But Gerry had gone on to the front door and out to the garage, a little idea jigging around in his mind. Gone were thoughts of accidents with car-exhaust fumes, of pushing Sandra under an Underground train. Suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed. Or, to be more precise, the balance of her body.

With no plan as yet firmly formulated, he nevertheless began laying the ground next evening in the pub.

"You're thoughtful, Gerry," said Sam Eagleton to him as he sat over his second pint. And indeed he was. It was quite a strain.

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Because Gerry was usually the life and soul of the Cock and Pheasant, with a steady stream of salacious, off-color, or racist jokes.

"Aye. It's the wife. She's a bit under the weather." After a pause, occupied with a gaze into the brown depths of his beer mug, he added: "It's the Change. It's a rotten thing to have to go through. It does things to a woman. We can count ourselves lucky we don't have anything like it."

It was a most un-Gerrylike topic of conversation. Sam Eagleton thought it a bit off to mention it at all, and not good form as it was understood at the Cock and Pheasant. He said, "Aye, it's a bad business," and changed the subject.

They got used, in the Cock and Pheasant and other places that Gerry Porter frequented, to the topic of the Change over the next few weeks. It was supplemented by other causes of worry and distress to Sandra, for Gerry had decided that her suicide would be the result of a cumulative burden of miseries, of myriad worries that finally became too much to bear.

"The wife's mother is in a bad way," he would say. "Senile. It's a terrible burden on Sandra."

Gerry's mother-in-law was in a Home, and he had in the past made ribald jokes about her increasingly erratic behavior. Now, apparently, all he could see was the distress that it must cause his wife.

"Gerry's gone all serious on us," said his friend Paul Tutin when he had left the pub one evening, still long-faced.

There were other problems and vicissitudes in the Porter household that were tediously canvassed. Sandra's attempts to get O-Level English, one of the things she studied at one of her many evening classes, had hitherto been the subject of innumerable sexist jokes about the thickness of women. Now all they heard was what a terrible grief it was to her. "But she shouldn't be trying to get it now," Gerry would say. "Not while she's going through the Change." They had no children to cause them worry, but nephews and nieces were pressed into service, and a brother of Sandra who was serving a jail sentence was represented as an agonizing worry. But in the end it all came back to the Change.

"It does something to some women," Gerry would say. "You've no idea. Sometimes I wonder if she's the same woman I married. She says that she dreads waking up every morning."

One afternoon while she was shopping in Darlington, Sandra

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dropped into the Cherry Tree Tea Shop and was glad to see two old friends sitting at the window. They waved her over to their table.

"Hello, Sandra, how *are* you?" Mary Eagleton hailed.

"Fine," said Sandra, sitting down. "Just fine."

"Oh, good. I *am* glad. Gerry was telling Sam the other night that the good old menopause was getting you down."

"A lot Gerry knows about it."

"When are you taking your O-Level again?" asked Mary, over the cream cakes.

"Next week!" said Sandra, roaring with laughter. "And I haven't opened a book since I failed last time. I bet the examiners are sharpening their pencils and licking their lips over the thought of giving me bottom grades."

"How's your mother?" asked Brenda Tutin.

"Great! Completely gaga. Doesn't even know me when I go in, so I've stopped going. It's a great relief."

"Gerry says you're very upset about it," said Brenda.

Sandra raised her eyebrows. "What ex*act*ly has Gerry been saying?" she asked.

Things went on pretty much as normal in the next few weeks. Sandra took up yet another evening class—cake-decorating, of all things—and so they saw very little of each other except at breakfast. Gerry insisted on the full menu with trimmings at breakfast time—porridge, egg and bacon with sausage and tomato, two or three slices of toast and marmalade. He said it set him up for the day. Sandra, who had been to diet classes and keep-fit classes, found cooking it rather nauseating, but she didn't have to watch him eat it because he propped up his morning newspaper against the coffee pot and devoured its edifying contents along with the bacon and sausage.

He was back from the pub (or from the newer model) more often in the evening now when she got back from her classes. He was even rather considerate, something he had not been for many years, not since the first week of their honeymoon. When she flopped down in the armchair ("Everything seems to tire her now," he said in the pub), he offered her a vodka and tonic, and was even prepared to make her a mug of Ovaltine. Sometimes she accepted, sometimes she didn't, but it was certainly pleasant to have him actually doing something for her in the kitchen. ("She's been desperate for sleep," Gerry planned to tell the police. "She's been trying everything . . .")

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The crunch came nearly six months after Gerry had first made his decision. Sandra got back from evening classes and was ex*haus*ted, she said.

"Vodka and tonic, darling?" Gerry asked.

"That *would* be nice, Smoochie," she said, using a pet name they had almost abandoned.

When he brought it over, Sandra noticed that he was not smelling of beer. She snuggled up on the sofa in front of the roaring gas fire. "This is the life," she said.

Gerry was watching her as she tasted her drink, though ostensibly he was at the sideboard getting one for himself. She gave no sign that it tasted any different, and he breathed out. She swung her feet up onto the sofa and took another sip or two of the vodka and tonic.

"Funny," she said. "I feel famished."

"Let me get you something."

"Would you, Smoochie? Just a few biscuits and a bit of cheese?"

When he got back, the vodka and tonic was half drunk. Sandra ate the biscuits and cheese ravenously. "I don't know why cake-decorating should be so *gruelling*," she said, taking a good swig at her drink. "I could almost settle down to sleep here in front of the fire."

"Why don't you?" Gerry said, sitting down on the floor by the head of the sofa and running his fingers through her hair.

Sandra downed the rest of her drink. "Lovely not to have the television on," she said, her voice seeming to come from far away. Her head dropped onto the arm of the sofa, her eyes closed. Soon Gerry heard gentle snores.

He jumped up and looked at his watch. It was just after ten. He could aim at the 10:45 or the 10:55. Both were expresses, and both were usually on time. He put in his pocket a little bottle of prepared vodka and sleeping draught. ("She had it with her drink. I thought she wanted to sleep—I didn't realize she wanted it to deaden the pain," he would tell the police.) He intended to force it down her throat if she should show signs of waking up.

He went out into the drive and opened both doors of his wife's little Fiat (his own Range Rover always had the garage), then he went back into the sitting room, took Sandra gently in his arms, and carried her out to the car. He sat her gently in the front passenger seat and got in beside her.

The drive to the bridge was uneventful, though Gerry was bathed in sweat by the end of it. They met no more than three or four cars

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going in the other direction. After only ten minutes, they turned into the narrow road, scarcely more than a track, which led to the railway bridge. His heart banged with relief as he parked Sandra's car under a clump of trees.

He looked at his watch. Ten minutes to go before the 10:45 came by, if it was on time. He looked at his wife. She was breathing deeply, her head lolling to one side. The Sovipol he'd gotten from the doctor ("*She* can't sleep, Doctor, and that means *I* don't sleep, and it's affecting the business.") was working like a dream. He got out of the car, leaned back in, and with a butcher's strength he lifted her across into the driver's seat. He wiped the steering wheel and then put her fingers on it in two or three different positions. Then he let her hands fall and pressed the little bottle of vodka and Sovipol into them.

("I was already in bed," he would tell the police. "I'd had a hard day. I was knackered. I did hear her driving off, but I thought she must have left something behind at her class. She's been getting very forgetful since the Change started.")

Time to get her onto the bridge. It was an old one, dating from the time when this neglected track was an important road. He took her in his arms and carried her—almost tenderly—the hundred yards there. No sound of a train yet. He set her down in a sitting position by the bridge and then straightened. God, he could do with a cigarette. But would that be wise? No—there in the distance was the regular hum of the diesel: the Intercity 125 from King's Cross to Leeds. He waited a moment. It wouldn't be here for a minute or two yet. Thank heaven he hadn't needed to force the contents of the bottle down her. His nerves were stretched beyond bearing by the tension as it was. Then, as the noise of the train grew nearer, he stretched down to the comatose figure by the bridge and put his hands under the body.

Immediately he felt an open palm smash into his face. And in a moment it was he who was on his back across the parapet of the bridge. Suddenly it was his wife who had strong hands on his shoulders, his wife who was pushing, pushing.

Dimly he heard her voice. "They were karate classes, Smoochie. Karate classes."

Then he was dropping into the path of the oncoming express.

The police were extremely sympathetic. It was child's play to them to unravel the details of Gerry's plan. They talked to his friends and

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heard about his change of character in his pub sessions, the conversations that had prepared the way. They found his dolly-bird in a little flat in central Darlington (though she said she would never have married him, not in a million years). They found the railways timetables in his study, analyzed the earth in the potted plant into which Sandra had poured most of her drink. ("It tasted so off, I thought he'd given me gin by mistake, which I hate, and I didn't want to offend him.")

They talked to the neighbor who had passed them on the road and seen that it was Gerry driving, talked to the poacher who had seen Gerry park the car and seen him press Sandra's hands to the steering wheel. *Those* prints wouldn't have deceived a rookie constable that they were those of a woman actually driving a car. No, Gerry Porter would never have got away with it, even if he had succeeded in killing his wife.

Sandra was quite affecting. She had drunk about a quarter of her drink, she said, but had filled the glass up with tonic water so he shouldn't know. ("He could be awfully touchy," she said.) What she had drunk had sent her soundly to sleep. When she began to awaken she was in the car, in the driver's seat, and her husband was pressing her hands to the steering wheel. She was confused and terrified. How had she got here? What was going on? She had feigned sleep until she'd heard the train and her husband lifted her up, and then—terrified—she had used the techniques she had learned at self-defense classes. ("The police are always recommending that we do them, with the number of ghastly rapes we've had around here.")

Only Inspector Potter of the South Yorkshire C.I.D. had doubts.

"Why weren't there more signs of struggle?" he asked. "Why did she make no attempt to immobilize him rather than kill him? Why did she take up karate classes mid-term, after he'd started laying the ground in his pubs? Why did she take such care, driving to the Darlington Police Station, not to disturb the fake prints?"

"She *had* to kill him," said the super. "Otherwise he'd have been stalking her through the woods. She was practically out of her mind."

"Yet she was careful not to disturb those prints. Oh, I grant you there's no point in nagging away at it. It's an academic exercise. We'd never secure a conviction, not even for manslaughter. Never in a million years."

But the doubts remained in his mind. He noticed that a few days after the inquest and funeral, Porter's Family Butchery was open again for business. He noted that Sandra ran it very efficiently, with

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the help of a stalwart chap fifteen years her junior whom he heard she had met at karate class. When, a year after Gerry's death, he saw in the paper that she had married him, he showed the announcement to the super.

"We'd never have got a conviction," he repeated. "But she did it very nicely, didn't she? Got her freedom, her boy friend, *and* the whole of the property. Beats a divorce settlement any time! He handed himself to her on a plate, did Gerry Porter. On a ruddy plate!"

DETECTIVERSE

BY REASON OR INSANITY

by ARDA M. HAENSZEL

He was caught with the gun,
And he said, "That was fun,"
This killer named Christopher Burton.
Let his counsel make plain
He was really insane,
Or it's curtains for Burton for certain.

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFF BROWN

On the crowded subway platform, the younger woman told her companion, "Thank God it's over. He was Lord Fawn. I want a Plantagenet." Familiar names to any admirer of the novels of the incomparable Anthony Trollope. Discreetly, the radio actor maneuvered to behold the speaker. Auburn hair, green eyes, features of exquisite delicacy! Trollope himself could have conceived no fairer heroine!

Jeff Brown is the author of two books for children, Flat Stanley *and* A Lamp for the Lambchops, *both published by Harper & Row. His stories and articles have appeared in* The New Yorker, Holiday, Saturday Review, The Saturday Evening Post, *and other magazines—now including* EQMM. *We will be hoping for more, and so will you . . .*

PLANTAGENET

by JEFF BROWN

Settling with the crossword at Nick's Dinette, my usual breakfast spot, I beheld a new face behind the counter, a blonde matron with the gaze of a sedated Valkyrie. Furling my *Times*, I sought to brighten her day.

"Behold, thou are fair, my love," I said. "Thy navel is a goblet surely, thy belly a heap of wheat. Coffee, please."

Flushing, the comely servitor filled my cup.

"Thank you," I said. "Breasts like young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies? Dare one hope?"

She fled, whimpering, and Nick spoke from behind the till. "That's Edna, my brother's wife. It's her first job."

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"She must learn, Nick," I said, "to cope with casual chat."

"You come on pretty strong, you know?"

"Tosh," I said. "Now my breakfast, if you will."

Fed, I departed for the subway, due shortly at a midtown studio, there to portray, vocally, a pair of gentlemen's briefs.

I am by profession a "Versatile Voice," and gain thereby, from radio and television, a handsome livelihood. Mine is the chortle of the Laxo-Mint troll. I am Mr. Fuji of Japanese Motors and British Travel's Lord Fothergill. A merry life, it may seem, but not wholly to my liking. Since the abrupt passing of my wife—poor shrewish Stella, crushed in mid-tirade beneath a Madison Avenue bus—I have grown fond of solitude. The crossword is my breakfast chum. I dine with Dickens and Trollope, Eliot and Meredith.

The day had begun predictably—it did not continue so. On the crowded platform that morning, as I completed my puzzle, my attention was suddenly seized. Two women stood near me. "Thank God it's over," the younger told her companion. "He was Lord Fawn. I want a Plantagenet."

Familiar names! Familiar indeed to any admirer of the novels of the incomparable Anthony Trollope. Lord Fawn, feckless suitor of Violet Effingham, Madame Goesler, and Lizzie Eustace. Plantagenet Palliser, heir to the Duke of Omnium, in time Prime Minister. Discreetly, I maneuvered to behold the speaker. Auburn hair, green eyes, features of exquisite delicacy! Trollope himself could have conceived no fairer heroine!

"Here comes the train, Roberta," said her stout companion. "Don't stand so near the edge."

We boarded. By some miracle, the two women found seats. Clinging to an adjacent strap, I strained, above the clatter, to overhear their chat. The stout friend, it appeared, was a stockbroker. Of Roberta, I gathered only that she was employed by some magazine devoted to the decorative arts. Now the friend turned to a book and Roberta, nibbling daintily from a packet of chocolate-covered raisins, began the crossword in her *Times*. Her pencil darted swiftly, her smile betrayed no trace of fret.

An expert puzzler, *and* a Trollopite! A sweet passion overwhelmed me. This was love!

But how to proceed? *Thank God it's over. I want a Plantagenet.* Splendid! Roberta was not only single, but free of entanglement. A direct approach? Nick's admonition, the consternation of his waitress, came alarmingly to mind. Best, I thought, to bide my time.

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Bide, it appeared, I must. As the train was about to leave the next station, Roberta glanced up, gasped, then sprang to the platform. The doors closed. I had lost her!

All that morning, conveying in firm baritone the pride of an elastic waistband, throughout an afternoon rehearsal as Lord Fothergill, over supper in my apartment, I despaired. In late evening, however, inspiration struck. Purchasing at a newsstand a dozen glossy magazines, I returned home and scanned the listings of staff names. In *Decor*, I found her—"Assistant Art Director: Roberta Tenney."

The telephone directory offered two Tenneys, the second an "R." Eureka!

The phone rang four times before a voice said sleepily, "Yes?"

"Miss Tenney? Roberta Tenney, of *Decor* magazine?"

"Yes. Who—? It's eleven o'clock, for heaven's sake."

I spoke with the courtliness appropriate to a future Duke. "This," I said, "is Plantagenet."

"Frank who?"

"Plantagenet. Palliser. A man as suited to you as Lord Fawn was not, one eager to present you with a jeweled etui. Shall we meet at some romantic adit, Roberta, then dine on nene and take in a raree?"

"Trollope at this hour? And *crosswords*? Who *is* this?"

"A secret admirer," I said. "One who longs to loom within your ken."

"To what?"

"Loom. Within your ken."

"I don't get this."

"Of Trollope's political novels, which do you prefer, Roberta?" I said. "*The Eustace Diamonds* is underrated, don't you think?"

There was silence for a moment.

"*Eustace* is fun, yes," she said. "Bye now. I'm hanging up."

"We must meet," I said. "Lunch? Tea? A drink?"

"No," Roberta said. "I do not go out, ever, with men I haven't met. It's a rule."

"Ridiculous!" I cried. "I am your destiny! We—"

"Never." She hung up.

Roberta's pert defiance, her maidenly caution, served only to increase my desire. But, in view of her rule, how to progress?

For a week, hopeful of further sightings, I lurked each morning on the subway platform where she had caught my eye. Twice I was

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rewarded. How charmingly, waiting for the train, she nibbled chocolate-covered raisins and worked the crossword in her *Times*.

It was the nibbles that inspired, one afternoon, a plan. At the shop of a celebrated confectioner, I purchased ten pounds of Swiss chocolate-covered raisins, directing the clerk to wrap the box in gold paper and affix a satin rosette. With this handsome parcel, I hastened to the mid-Manhattan offices of *Decor*.

"Art department?" The receptionist, busy behind a switchboard, gestured toward a door. "Through there."

Beyond the door and down a hallway I found a large room containing desks and drawing tables. These were deserted, but at the far end, at a conference table, Roberta and several others were being addressed by a swarthy man in a purple shirt. Turning as I approached, he said curtly, "We're in a meeting. Leave it outside, okay?"

"Miss Tenney?" I shifted the gold box to my other hip. "Roberta Tenney?"

An earringed little girl spoke from the foot of the table. "Juth go back where you came in," she lisped. "The recepthonist'll take your bockth."

"It's all right, Bree." Rising, my beloved smiled. "I'm Miss Tenney."

My glimpses of Roberta had hitherto been fleeting. In clear view, her beauty was stunning. My teeth ached, my toes curled with love. The stares of her associates discomfited me further. I had fancied introducing myself to Roberta in her office, where, beguiled by a near-lifetime supply of her favorite candy, she would consent to a later, more intimate rendezvous. But here? Before a host of uncaring strangers?

Uncertain, I said, "How do you do?" and presented the box.

Roberta sagged briefly beneath its weight. "My! Thank you."

"Not at all." Affecting nonchalance, I turned to go. Then, once again, inspiration struck. Turning back, I said, "The circumstances are unusual. Allow me to explain."

"For God's sake!" the swarthy man said.

I spoke with cool precision, tempered by diffidence. "Just half an hour ago, having finished lunch," I said, "I stepped into the men's room of a small French restaurant in this neighborhood. There a gentleman addressed me. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said, 'but what is your favorite charity?' I replied, 'The Red Cross is high on my list. Why do you ask?' 'Because I need help,' the fellow said. 'I am more than

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willing to pay for it, but you are clearly not a messenger and I don't have the time to find one.'

"He showed me the box I've just presented here. 'This,' he said, 'must be delivered to a young woman named Roberta Tenney, whose office is close by. However, for reasons I'm unwilling to explain, it is out of the question for *me* to do this. If you, sir, will be so kind as to undertake the task, you have my word that I will donate one thousand dollars to the Red Cross.' I was startled, of course, but the chap's sincerity was beyond question, and I had the time. There you have it, the full story."

The *Decor* staffers were thrilled. "Great!" "How *fas*cinating!" "Open it, Bobby!" "Let's see what it is!"

Roberta, delightfully flushed, tore away the paper and opened the box. "Chocolate-covered raisins! A *ton* of them!" She reached into the box.

"Thtop!" someone said, and she snatched back her hand.

It was the little woman with the long earrings. "Bobby," she said earnestly, "he could be a loony, the man in the rethtaurant. There could be *poithon* in thoth thingth!"

This idiocy had its effect. There were gasps all round. Roberta, frowning, set the box on the table.

I spoke sharply. "The man was no lunatic. He was a personable, well dressed fellow, I assure you."

"Well *drethed?* Tho what?" snapped the priss. "Don't eat the raithins, Bobby!"

Stepping forward, I helped myself to a handful of raisins and chewed them slowly, maintaining a little smile. The *Decor* staffers gaped, as though expecting me to claw suddenly at my throat. "Delicious," I said, swallowing. "Excellent."

Roberta laughed. "Let's all have some!"

The priss rolled her eyes. "It might be a *bomb*, Bobby. I read juth yethterday, in Ireland, a man wath blown up. A *bokth* bomb! You take thomething out, and *boom!* Thith man went right through the *roof!*"

Again, the faces about the table expressed concern. Within me, something snapped.

"A bomb?" I said. "Let us find out."

I took up the box. Balancing it on my right palm, I held it ear-level in the classic shotputter's stance, gave slightly at the knees, and flung it. *Plop!* It struck high on the wall above the conference table. Chocolate-covered raisins fell like rain.

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With the *plop*, the *Decor* people ducked down. Now they straightened, gathering themselves. Roberta's eyes met mine. Nothing in them, or in those of her associates, suggested that my presence would be missed.

"Good day," I said, and left them.

That evening, after a light supper, I phoned Roberta.

"Plantagenet here," I said. "I trust it's not too late to call."

"Plant—? Oh! Trollope and crosswords, right?" She sighed. "This is *some* day I'm having."

"We must meet," I said. "Dare with me, Roberta. How we would hit it off!"

"Listen, Planty," she said. "I told you—I don't date strangers. Go way. Leave me alone."

Delicious! I savored the moment before I spoke. "But in a sense, Roberta, we are no longer strangers."

"We're not?"

"You received, this afternoon, a gift of chocolate-covered raisins. Remember?"

"Remember?" she said. "Will I ever *forget*? But how—? Oh, you're the one in the French restaurant! You told this man you'd give the Red Cross a thousand— Wait till you hear! He came over with the raisins and—"

"No, no." I chuckled. "The story was a fiction. It was *I* who delivered the raisins."

"—threw the box against the wall!" Roberta said. "A fat old man with a hawky nose! In a *cape*, yet! He—" She broke off.

I could hear her breathing.

"You?" she said. "You? My God, what a sick—" I hung up.

Her coarseness echoed in my head. How I had misjudged her! So gross, so unlike a Trollope maiden, so unworthy of Plantagenet. I sat, reflecting, until my thoughts ran clear again. She must answer. Yes. Like Stella, she must answer. Sharp-tongued Stella, lost beneath the speeding bus. Bitch Roberta in the subway, intent upon a crossword, inches only from the platform's edge.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Nobody grasped that Bruno Boscobel was a common or garden specimen of lightly pickled Fleet Street hack, the '65 vintage, not the least remarkable. Contrariwise, nobody understood that Francine Kefavy, immeasurably tamer and copybook sedate by comparison, happened to be barking mad.

The village of Marywell neither grasped nor understood, but Rupert Arbruster suspected. Just a hunch, a frisson *of delightful possibilities round the corner and down the road. Armbuster (Rupert's nickname around the village, a sarcastic hint as to his business methods and general ethics) was a mischief-maker impure and simple. Where other men constructed model aircraft or built conservatory extensions or threw clay pots for relaxation, Armbuster made mischief . . .*

THE KILLING FLOOR

by JEFFRY SCOTT

One man's deadly insult is another's sprightly badinage, merest table talk, airy epigram. Similarly, the blow that might jolt some sedentary office worker into red-misted rage tends to be mistaken for a passing nudge by those of the longshoremen, professional wrestling, or trucker fraternities.

In other words, there is no telling what (as an elegant piece of British slang puts it) will get up a person's nose.

Francine Kefavy considered her nose to be chic and aristocratic. Others might see it as pointy, but Ms. Kefavy looked in the mirror and discerned the nose of a lady and a creative artist.

And—forgive that wretched argot—Bruno Boscobel got right up

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it, lodging as firmly and unpleasantly as hay fever or one of those summer colds which, any fool knows, are the worst.

Poor Bruno had no inkling of his role as emotional and social scourge of Francine Kefavy's sinuses. He thought himself a pretty good fellow on the whole, friend to all. He even imagined that Francine Kefavy fancied him. Well, he might have argued, whenever they were in the same room she kept looking at him. Ahem. *You* know—catching a fellow's eye, as one might say.

"I'm definitely in with a chance there, old boy," he confided to his chum Rupert Arbruster.

"Ever the romantic," Rupert said drily. Chairman of a small but thriving property company, Rupert's nickname around the village was "Armbuster," a sarcastic hint as to his business methods and general ethics. He and Bruno Boscobel were drinking in the saloon bar of the Fugitive Royalist.

Sarcasm rolled off Bruno's knife—he wasn't too swift, despite being fairly intelligent in his way, not without culture and literary taste. "Yes, I am romantic," he agreed, shyly. "La Kefavy is a bit soppy about me, between ourselves. Been giving me the eye. Shame she's so flat-chested. And she has the air of a woman who'd talk a lot. Still, any old port in a storm. I might give her a whirl if the little black book looks ready to be remaindered."

Armbuster stood him a Scotch, not the evening's first. "I don't know how you do it," he purred, falsely admiring. "You pick up a minimal hint—the lowering of eyelids or the slightest touch of heightened color—while saps like me just don't understand women at all. I mean, I could have sworn Francine Kefavy hates the sight of you."

Bruno gave his drinking partner a boiled stare. "Envy," he said at last. "It's a nasty flaw in your nature, old son. Women melt when they get to know me. Nothing specific I do or say, perfectly effortless, but it happens. Luck of the draw, like being born with red hair or a squint. You follow?"

"Treading on your heels," Armbuster assured him.

"Ha-bloody-ha. Why in the world would La Kefavy hate me? I've actually read her books, remember. Novels in the plural, count 'em, *three* of the wretched things. That must put me in a very elite club for a start." Bruno chuckled grimly. "Three men and a dog, as the saying goes—her, me, and the printer."

"Don't you mean publisher, Bruno?"

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"Grow up. The *publisher* can't have read those blessed books or they wouldn't have been published, it stands to reason."

Mrs. Pollard, barmaid at the Fugitive Royalist, often confessed to a condition she termed "listening ears." She would go to her grave sooner than eavesdrop, Ida Pollard explained, it was just that she couldn't help hearing from farther away and with more clarity than folk bargained for. The other thing Mrs. Pollard couldn't help doing was passing her gleanings along.

Not that she told Francine Kefavy directly. That would have been malicious and what sort of woman did you take Ida for, anyway? No, Ida told Bessie Hogsbreth, Ms. Kefavy's twice-weekly cleaning lady. Bessie was a gossip column on the hoof, but Ida's hands were clean—she couldn't be held responsible for the failings of friends.

Boorish Bruno Boscobel got one thing right: Francine *was* interested in him. Obsessively so. He was ruining her life just by living in the village of Marywell.

Shopping lists and washroom walls apart, Ms. Kefavy had been the village's only writer for *years*. Backing into such limelight as Marywell afforded, Francine Kefavy loved it. During the one TV interview of her career, she confided with great sincerity that fame had its price and "I can't even go out to post a letter without being recognized." It never struck her that Marywell's population being comfortably under two thousand, nobody living there for long was likely to go unrecognized.

Bruno's arrival shattered Ms. Kefavy's dream. He was a Fleet Street columnist who put himself out to grass in the village on the proceeds of a trashy *roman a clef* thriller heavy on cliches, four-letter words, and ingenious, indeed intricately inventive perversions. To Francine's chagrin, Marywell couldn't tell the difference between a sensitive woman with the gem-bright soul of a poet and some literary lout coining money from making marks on paper. Hilda Torshan, Ms. Kefavy's chief toady, made that clear when reporting that Boscobel had bought the bungalow next to the pub. "He's a writer, too—at last you'll have a fellow spirit." This was brazen fishing for compliments, Hilda wishing to be confirmed in her rank of First Fellow Spirit.

It didn't work. Francine scowled, and dazedly, unaware that teeth were being ground, Hilda wondered why her fastidious friend had taken to chewing gum. Ms. Kefavy spoke indistinctly. "I do not wish to be put on that man's level, thanks."

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Nodding understandingly, Hilda struck a cruel blow. "Oh, Bruno's better known, dear, but your time will come. And it doesn't matter—Bruno is ever so approachable, he talks to anybody."

Things got worse. Days later, Francine happened to be studying an ancient tombstone in the graveyard of Marywell's parish church. (Schoolboys copy and cheat, creative artists research.) Voices startled her—the vicar's voice and another, sloppy, whisky-hoarse, infuriating, which she sensed belonged to that beast, Bruno Boscobel.

Mr. Carruthers was saying, "The Athens of North Somerset, the way we're going. Two notable authors, it might start a colony, eh? Er, you've read Francine Kefavy?"

"Not half," Bruno confirmed, with such vigor that the eavesdropper's scowl began softening to a simper.

It must be explained that Francine's novels were pastels which had been left out for a night in the rain. Their only strength lay in a strong family resemblance one to another. The settings were that convenient if unsatisfactory land beyond the seas, Abroad. A female central character rather than a heroine would be discovered in ambiguous circumstances, never clarified. She seemed to be grappling with a problem, not defined. Then she would do something, it seemed possible, or then again perhaps not. It depended on one's interpretation. The End.

Bruno's admission evidently startled the vicar. Mr. Carruthers said wonderingly, "You have read them, all of them?" Then, "And liked them, it goes without saying."

Francine, joints cracking, crouched lower in cover, preparing for tribute. "I never said that," Bruno sniggered. "If I want a crossword, point me to the back page of the *Daily Telegraph*. No, I had a terrible spell of insomnia last winter and only a real jaw-cracking bore of a book could guarantee me decent sleep. Nothing like twaddle for inducing heavy eyelids—it beats sleeping pills hands down."

Vicar and barbarian strolled on out of earshot. Francine Kefavy screamed silently, banging her head against the tombstone.

Bessie Hogsbreth's priorities were more practical than literary. As Marywell's motormouthed bard and herald, she grabbed the tidbit tossed by Ida Pollard and raced away to warn Francine that That Mr. Boscobel had designs on her (Ms. Kefavy's) body. "Though he did reckon as you was not as busty as you might be, cheeky beggar," Bessie relayed.

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No response. Bessie Hogsbreth wheedled, "Might you be a liddle bit soft on him yourself, Miss?"

Francine stared at the wall. This latest news was a pinprick, no more. She was indulging in a wistful fantasy sparked by having sat through the Midnight Movie on TV. Francine saw herself in poncho and sombrero, festooned with pistols, daggers, bandoliers of ammunition. Mad with bloodlust and loyalty, a throng of rebels waited for her orders. Eyes misty, she murmured, "Bring me the head of Bruno Boscobel."

"Beg pardon?" Bessie Hogsbreth gasped.

Francine blinked, smiled meaninglessly, and corrected herself. "Mr. Boscobel has a swelled head, Bessie. I think you might as well make a start on turning out the attic this morning." Boscobel was the Great Satan, but Bessie had elected to be his messenger—and Francine knew that Bessie Hogsbreth, just about as wide as she was tall, disliked work of all sorts and positively hated stairs.

The village expected An Author to be, well, different. Francine Kefavy had been a disappointment—a little vague, a little snobbish, and her books couldn't be made head nor tail of, but that hardly added up to bohemian eccentricity.

Bruno Boscobel was better value, Marywell agreed. He was free with his money, swore cheerfully and compulsively (breeding a legend that Mr. Carruthers' snorter of a sermon against Sunday opening of shops had won a ringingly approving "A-bloody-men, Vic!" from his new parishioner), imported pretty ladies for weekends, and fell down a lot. A proper author. You knew where you were with Mr. B.

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Armbuster was a mischief-maker impure and simple. Literally so. Where other men constructed model aircraft or built conservatory extensions or threw clay pots for relaxation, Armbuster made mischief. "I like winding people up," he confessed to his wife—another of the same type.

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Sue Arbruster and her spouse never set out to persecute Francine Kefavy and send her over the edge. They hardly knew her, except by sight. But Bruno Boscobel was a lecherous buffoon and Ms. Kefavy a pretentious, very likely frigid single lady. For the wicked couple, this was tantamount to presenting urchins with a half brick, a plate-glass window, and a clear avenue of escape.

Standing Bruno "the other half" in the Fugitive Royalist toward closing time one autumn night, Armbuster suggested, "You really ought to do something about ol' Francine. She talks about you all the time, casual-like. Sue was chatting to her at the post office yesterday and Francine was sort of hinting that we ought to ask the pair of you to dinner."

Avoiding eye contact, Armbuster added casually, "Sue thinks ol' Francine has hidden depths—very sexy behind all the touch-me-not stuff. A right raver, Sue thinks. Women pick up on these things." Then he changed the subject. Some of his happiest childhood memories involved slipping noisier brands of fireworks through letter boxes on Guy Fawkes Night. He'd never forgotten the instruction on the firework: "Light the blue touchpaper and retire immediately." Armbuster considered them words to live by.

Archie Gilligan, staunch Rotarian, never knew what to say at the weekly lunch. He'd been running Marywell Hardware & Plant Hire lo these many years and found his trade fascinating, but gradually, over a quarter century or more, got the vague impression that his peers did not share that valuation.

So he was in better than usual spirits after Francine Kefavy's visit to his shop. "Women!" he exclaimed over the tomato soup and soft roll an hour later. "They can be good as a Marx Brothers film. This lady—no names, but she lives not a million miles from here—comes in this morning. Wants an electric carving knife, looks at it, says, 'It may not be adequate,' if you please, and ends up buying a chainsaw."

Even as he spoke, Francine was parking her car outside a warehouse at Ambergreen, the nearest market town to Marywell. She bought a large roll of heavy-duty plastic sheeting, insisted on it being wrapped in brown paper, and tipped the salesman— meagerly—for lashing the anonymous tube to her roof rack.

"Change of life," Bessie Hogsbreth told Ida Pollard. "Got to be—she's acting very funny.

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"Well, you know her, all la-de-da and never soiling her hands. Now she's got that little room off the kitchen, the old scullery, all draped with that there Polynesian stuff, poly-something, anyway. Reckons she wants to try her hand at Do It Yourself, color-wash the ceiling and that, turn it into a den. I bet she don't know which end of the brush to hold. It's the Change, mark my words, and all this time she's put it about she was born in nineteen sixty-one, lying old baggage!"

Ida mused, "You're too hard on her, Bess. Living alone in that great barracks of a house is bound to get her down. Maybe the money's running out. Maybe Miss Key-favy wants to brighten the place up and *has* to do it herself."

"Rubbish," scorned the expert. "That scullery hasn't been touched ever since she turned it into—into a great big empty plastic bag."

Francine Kefavy felt that Providence was at work.

Ida Pollard and Bessie Hogsbreth would have been appalled instead of intrigued had they known Francine's secret name for the scullery at The Grange. She called it The Killing Floor.

Marywell didn't know, Armbuster's suspicion was subconscious, and Francine Kefavy had no idea that she was card-carrying insane. It all made sense to her.

Bruno Boscobel had to go—and not just from the village, but mortal-coilwise. She was the only person to perceive what an abomination he was—an *intolerable* presence. Very well, want a thing done, do it yourself. She must remove him. By the same token, she was aware of tiresome laws.

Francine had read detective stories as a schoolgirl. Killing—no, *deleting*—the wretched fellow was just the start of the project. He must disappear forever, and at a time when she could not be suspected. First the alibi, then the crime. It was quite fun, intellectually stimulating and emotionally exciting, once she launched the enterprise.

The chainsaw would speed her task of disappearing Bruno. The Killing Floor's preparation ensured that any forensic clues could be rolled up and put on the bonfire. Francine couldn't repress giggles when reviewing her plan: nobody can be in two places at once, but Bruno Boscobel would be in countless places at once by the time she'd finished with him.

Preparations turned out to be half the fun. She was almost sorry

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she had to kill him at all because that would be the final note of this heady overture.

First, though, Francine resolved on a dress rehearsal for every stage.

"Bessie, you needn't come next week. I have to go away—the Harrogate uncle. Would you book me in with your Ted at the garage any day this week? I'm not driving all that way until the car's been serviced, and I want to start on Saturday night, the motorways are so much easier then."

On Saturday night, Francine set off in her little red car. Bessie Hogsbreth was waiting at the bus stop outside the Fugitive Royalist. Francine tooted and waved, Bessie mouthed "Good journey," and then Francine drove forty miles to Bristol, left the car in a long-stay parking lot at the airport, donned wig, dark glasses, and specially purchased raincoat in a gaudy shade she never wore, and caught the last country bus to Taunton. Alighting at the crossroads, she took the bridle path running past The Grange and slipped in by the back door.

The next three days were spent in the wine cellar. Rather like camping out indoors with sleeping bag, bottled-fuel lamp, a crate of Perrier water, and abundant canned and freeze-dried food. The Grange's doors were locked, milk and newspaper deliveries cancelled. Francine had switched the power off at the mains, fearful that habit would trick her into showing a light.

When it was safely dark, she would leave the cellar and take a turn along the picture gallery for exercise. Its windows were shuttered—no risk of being seen. In any case, The Grange was secluded, passersby few and incurious except for PC Tatmole, the village bobby, who'd promised to check the house on his nightly rounds. His arrival was signaled by the screech of unoiled hinges when he opened the garden gate. Francine was gratified when Ned Tatmole proved as good as his word, rattling front and back doors on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday nights around eleven P.M.

On Wednesday night, he caught her out. She was marching up and down the gallery, thinking she must be like a Napoleonic War sea captain pacing his quarterdeck, when the screech announced a caller. Frozen, Francine looked at her watch. It was just after eight P.M.

No rattle of the door handle, the knocker boomed, followed by a jaunty peal of the bell. Heart racing, skin damp, Francine was non-

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plussed. Then she gave herself a stern lecture. *She hadn't done anything*—yet. Again the knocker, once more the bell.

On tiptoe, she scurried out of the gallery and skulked to the circular window at the end of the landing, above the porch. Pressed against the wall, she peeped out.

In time for Bruno Boscobel to back away from the front door and hands on hips, face turned into a bleached disc by moonlight, stare up at her. Francine flinched, but there was no reaction from Bruno He wasn't staring at her, she realized, but at The Grange.

More attention to bell and knocker.

Francine's brain went into overdrive. The Harrogate uncle, de spite being as near senile as made no odds, insisted on living alon and looking after himself. She could arrive on Thursday afternoo and by breakfast the next day persuade him that she had been ther all week.

Her problem, which she'd planned to address at the next stage o the preparations, had been to lure Bruno Boscobel to The Grang at the very time when everyone knew she was hundreds of mile away, without blowing her cover or leaving any link between hersel and the victim.

The problem was solved. Rehearsal had turned into first night Lips parted, Francine exhaled slowly and went downstairs.

Bruno was lumbering away down the garden path when sh opened the door. "Oh, hello." He grinned foolishly, his voic thick—thicker than usual, she decided scornfully as he returned.

He tripped on the shallow front step, toppled, and smacked a palm against the doorjamb. "Whoops, nearly a nasty accident. Fancy that you *are* here. See, I was at a loose end and thought I'd drop in. Felt a right twit when nothing happened—knock knock, ring ring—then I remembered you'd gone away. But you're back."

She couldn't trust herself to speak.

Bruno misinterpreted the silence. "Thought I didn't want to know, eh? Everything comes to those who wait," he leered. Francine's eyes blazed agreement, and Bruno nodded and winked. "Yeah, it's daft. We're adults, right? All this meaning-looks malarky is fine for school kids, but cut to the chase, that's the ticket." He shuddered at a gust of night wind. "You might ask me in. And would a drink be out of the question?"

"I want you to come in," she assured him grimly, standing aside.

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"That's more like it," he chortled, brushing past in a haze of strong drink, perceptible as aftershave.

Francine shut the front door and relocked it. "Straight down to the door at the end there," she said, "and through the kitchen."

Scraping, brushing, a curse. "I can't see a bloody thing, gel."

"It must be the fuses." Francine walked down the passage with the certainty of knowledge, flashlight in her left hand, but unlit. She took Boscobel's sweaty paw, grimacing at the prompt squeezing, and towed him to the scullery. She pressed the torch's button and, plastic sheet squeaking and creaking as he swayed, Bruno squinted at what the beam revealed.

"Kinky," he suggested uncertainly. "A bit, um, bleak."

Francine set the torch on the shelf beside the scullery door. "Wait and see," she said. Bruno smacked his lips and then Francine smacked *him*. The Victorian flatiron had been waiting on the shelf for her to pick up once the torch was laid down, throwing a circle of light around her target. She hit him and hit him again, and then knelt down and did some more hitting—but you get the idea.

The chainsaw worked beautifully.

So did the rest of her scheme, up to a point. It was a busy night. Having killed Bruno, Francine ran a bath—the power was switched off still, but she didn't mind a cold tub—disrobing for Bruno's dismemberment, padding downstairs, and yanking the chainsaw to life. These activities were suspended an hour before PC Tatmole's scheduled patrol, resumed half an hour later.

In the early hours, goose-bumped and nude, Francine was emptying the contents of the plastic-floor-covering bundle out onto the lawn for treatment later. Back in the scullery, she tugged the wall sheets from their stapled attachments, returned to the garden, rolled all the sheets, gory one innermost, into a sort of sausage, and, adding the flatiron, secured the package with twine. She'd decided against a bonfire. Absentee residents do not light bonfires at dead of night.

Once everything had been attended to, Francine took a needful and refreshing bath. Alibi set up, evidence ready for disposal, the Killing Floor pristine.

Pushing her folding bicycle along the bridle path, plastic sausage balanced across its saddle, Francine paused beside the Travey—a dull river where it skirts Marywell, but useful.

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Ballasted by the iron and some rockery stones, the sausage floated to midstream, wallowed a hundred yards, and sank with a reassuringly intent, no-reservations air.

Wearing the wig and the gaudy raincoat (sensibly, she decided against sunglasses at that hour), Francine mounted her bicycle and pedaled to Ambergreen. There she folded the machine, entrusted it to the station's Left Luggage department—yawning, scratching its bristles, and reading a paper—and caught the workmen's special to Bristol with ten minutes to spare.

She got back from Harrogate the following Sunday. Bruno Boscobel's abrupt departure was generating idle, faintly ribald interest in Marywell. Francine hid a smile on learning that many villagers were sure A Woman Was Behind It.

What Francine, virgin to murder as much else, was unprepared for was the impact of post-homicidal depression. She'd killed him, the insolent oaf was out of her hair, big deal. (Francine phrased it more gracefully, but that was the thrust.) She missed the thrill and anticipation of being about to murder Bruno Boscobel.

Francine couldn't settle to writing, read the same paragraph of her favorite book (one of her own) over and over again, sighed a great deal, and fidgeted. A week turned into ten days and her interests revived—though feebly, fitfully. Bess Hogsbreth, vacuuming the master bedroom, called down, "You've got such a lovely lot of birds on the lawn, Miss. Bless their little hearts!"

Francine glanced up from her desk, took in a mass of starlings, a clerically self-important crow, some iridescent magpies, smiled listlessly, and returned to her doodling.

Always alert for pretexts to idle, Bess Hogsbreth trundled downstairs soon afterward and went to the window. Francine observed, "Ornithology is a new departure for you, Mrs. Hogsbreth." Pearls before swine, gentle irony applied to Bess was tantamount to tickling a rhino with a scrap of swansdown.

"I'll be off about my work, husband and kids to see to," the crone said sourly, stung by tone if not meaning. Yet she lingered at the french windows, nose pressed to the glass. The next time Francine looked out, Mrs. Hogsbreth was stumping over the lawn, scattering indignant birds. Pity, Francine reflected, that the infernal woman didn't show as much energy when she was being paid for it.

Francine was astonished by her calmness and poise, especially on

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such a bizarre day. Really, everything was at sixes and sevens. No sooner had silly Bess Hogsbreth had hysterics in the garden and run off toward Marywell shrieking like a locomotive with its whistle stuck than the police arrived.

Such a lot of them and so fearfully out of temper, too. "Ridiculous," Francine repeated loftily. "Killed Mr. Boscobel? Me? Here? Melodrama, stuff and nonsense. Find his body." She pulled herself up and looked sly. "Should you ever find his body, then you can accuse—"

The fat one with dandruff and a double-chin, Inspector, Superintendent, something of that nature, exploded. "Find it? We *keep* finding it, madam." He gestured at the garden, and his sergeant, a fragile-seeming youth, gulped hard and shut his eyes in misery.

"All over the lawn," the senior policeman growled. "Word in Marywell is that the deceased used to get around a bit, but, my sainted aunt, it's nothing on what he managed here." He wagged his head and sucked a back tooth reflectively. "I've got Mr. Boscobel's book at home. Grand read it was, too—though near the knuckle. 'Widely read,' it says on the back flap. Widely spread is what he is now, poor gentleman."

Francine had stopped listening as soon as Boscobel's prose legacy to the nation was mentioned. Head on one side, eyes narrowed, she was reviewing the recent past, retracing every step.

"There!" She snapped her fingers. "Something's been nagging me ever since that night. So much to arrange, so many details, and I was so dreadfully, er, avid for clean water, it slipped my mind."

The policeman goggled at her.

"Disposal of the corpse," she explained impatiently. "I was so anxious to destroy every clue and trace that I forgot about the actual body, per se. Silly me." She laughed prettily, trusting that it tinkled, inviting them to share the humor. "All that forethought and planning—then I went to pieces. Just like beastly Boscobel!"

The Fugitive Royalist was having a slack night and Armbuster, black-tied from Bruno Boscobel's memorial service earlier in the day, was sole patron of the saloon bar. "Well might you look glum," Ida Pollard observed, good-naturedly enough. "You've got a lot to answer for, Roop Arbruster. Started the whole thing off, you did."

"Give over! What a terrible thing to say. I just wound the pair of 'em up. It's my way—I wind people up." Armbuster showed genuine

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shock. "Hey, you can't seriously think I expected her to go potty and chop poor ol' Bruno into chunks?"

Ida rolled her eyes and shrugged fatalistically. "Poor Miss Key-favy more like. They wouldn't even let her have her day in court—just whisked her away to that terrible place."

Armbuster drained his Scotch. "Well, she was unfit to plead, crazy as a three-sided penny. Arnold Wesker, my insurance broker, his youngest boy's pal's sister is a nurse at Cragston Hall. Arnold says that Francine Kefavy's happy as the day is long. Runs the writers' workshop, edits the inmates' magazine. When she looks like cutting up rough, they don't bother with sedatives, the pal's sister told Arnold's son. No, they tell Francine she's just been shortlisted for the Booker Prize and she's right as rain, wouldn't harm a fly."

"That's all right then," Ida informed the glass she was polishing, not caring either way.

Glowering at her, Armbuster returned to his earlier grievance. "You've got a nasty tongue, Ida. Come on, what in the world would I gain from destroying two people who—" His words trailed off into busily thoughtful silence and Armbuster rose abruptly and strode out of the pub.

Next morning he was waiting on the doorstep when Francine Kefavy's lawyer opened for business. The lawyer referred him to his former client's only living relative and Armbuster spurred his Jaguar northward. By lunchtime he was fast-talking the Harrogate uncle, by sundown he'd bought The Grange for a fraction of its redevelopment value (the Harrogate uncle believed himself to be a hamster and cuddly rodents are notorious for ineptitude in the property market), and by year's end The Grange was no more and Armbuster had replaced it with a whole estate of ticky-tacky houses.

He had to do it, Armbuster maintains with only the ghost of a twinkle, the shadow of a grin, for the sake of Francine Kefavy—the consolation she must derive from knowing that Armbuster's success, fulfilling a capitalist society's rightful aspirations and the philosophy of Margaret Thatcher, means that Bruno Boscobel did not die in vain.

"Q"

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Miss Kilby went down Main Street at her usual speed—15 m.p.h., neither more nor less—almost obeyed the stop sign where Main ends at the state highway, turned left toward Arkansas, straddled the center line, kicked her speed all the way up to 25, and didn't slow down until she'd gone almost the entire 0.73 mile to Joe Wolff's service station . . .

FENDER BENDER

by H. H. MORRIS

The sheriff refused to come to an arrangement with Miss Violet Kilby—as in arranging to have her driver's license lifted, her car confiscated and sold for scrap, or both. He explained that she was a senior citizen. I pointed out that he'd stated the problem perfectly, that Miss Kilby had been a senior citizen so long that people presently contemplating retirement couldn't remember when she wasn't a senior citizen.

"We have a lot of seniors in this county," said the sheriff. "Almost all of them vote at least once."

That clinched it.

Miss Kilby didn't come from our neck of the woods, but she'd been around so long that most people thought of her as a native. She gave piano lessons. Unlike most music teachers, she didn't meet her pupils in her home, a school, or a church. Miss Kilby drove her 1953 Hudson Hornet from student to student. After a thirty-minute lesson, she gladly accepted a non-alcoholic and seasonably hot or cold beverage, as well as a small portion of carrot cake, brownies, mince pie, divinity, or some other delicacy. What her traveling around cost her in gas, she made back in food.

That traveling around had made me approach the sheriff once again. Miss Kilby no longer saw well. During the past three years, she had hit two cows, seven mailboxes, fourteen chickens, three ducks, and one Volkswagen Rabbit. And that was only the domestic and legally reported body count. None of these sudden impacts had significantly damaged her Hudson.

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"They don't build nothing like that nowadays," said the sheriff.

I started to remind him that the Army still purchases tanks and armored personnel carriers. Then I thought about a couple of TV shows I'd seen. They'd said that the military sometimes got inferior workmanship.

"Besides," he said, "I can't get away with depriving an old lady of her livelihood just because a few jackasses ain't bright enough to fence in cows, chickens, and Volkswagens. And I got a promise from Miss Kilby that she won't drive on any main roads."

Either the sheriff or Miss Violet Kilby played games with the definition of a main road. She didn't drive on any interstates because none came through Tarbut County. But I'd seen her clogging up traffic on Main Street as she drove 15 m.p.h., neither more nor less, through town. The day I was chasing a bank robber I wound up right behind Miss Kilby as she went down Main Street at her usual speed, almost obeyed the stop sign where Main ends at the state highway, turned left toward Arkansas, straddled the center line, kicked her speed all the way up to 25, and didn't slow down until she'd gone almost the entire 0.73 mile to Joe Wolff's service station.

We don't get many bank robbers. Quite a few farmers claim their great-great-grandfathers once watered horses for Frank, Jesse, Cole, and the other boys from the old Saturday-movies. And no one sober can believe how many older citizens saw Bonnie and Clyde passing through on their way to shoot up part of Joplin. Locally, we get no action. My local banker says that's because we don't have available assets worth stealing.

According to the APB, this man had hit a bank in Siloam Springs and headed north out of town. A witness had just reported possibly having seen him head through Gravette at high speed—that kept him heading north and, with the usual reporting delays and his understandable eagerness to leave Arkansas quickly, ought to put him very near my present location.

I reviewed the description. Armed and dangerous. Height between 60″ and 80″. Build medium to obese or skinny. Hair black, dark-brown, blond, grey, or he's bald. Clean-shaven with a beard. A white car, probably a Ford, with an Oklahoma plate. The Arkansas authorities said to rely on the vehicle description, since it came from a nine-year-old girl who correctly identified the make of every car they pointed to.

If the robber was local, he'd hit the dirt roads that connected the back hollers, and we'd need the National Guard to watch effectively.

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An Oklahoma car heading north from an Arkansas heist suggested a stolen vehicle and a stranger who needed to depend on the red, blue, and green lines on a map. That put me on just about the only possible piece of asphalt, unless he decided to stay in Arkansas or head west toward Oklahoma. That was one reason I didn't use my siren and red light to get Miss Kilby out of my way. She had the center line so perfectly straddled that oncoming cars needed to stop on the shoulder to avoid her. No one in the rapidly lengthening line of cars behind us wanted to risk his life or a ticket trying to get around my marked car. It was too bad she wasn't headed for the state line. She'd let me establish an ideal rolling roadblock.

The other reason I didn't kick on light and siren was that I doubted whether Miss Kilby would let them deter her. She was headed directly for Joe Wolff's station. That was where she would stop. Then Elmer Barth interfered with her plans just before she was ready to turn left. He'd driven too fast since both of us were boys in high school. He tried to stop, but his red GMC pickup paid for his recklessness. When he finished bouncing off Miss Kilby's Hudson, his truck had several dents and the highway was completely blocked. I turned on my light and got out of the cruiser.

Elmer got out and started swearing. I told him to shut up and made sure he wasn't hurt. Then Miss Kilby got out of her car and shook her furled umbrella at Elmer.

"You were driving too fast, young man," she told him.

"And on my side of the road!"

"What? Don't mumble."

My Great-Uncle Tobias, who my maternal grandmother, his sister-in-law, had called a jakeleg preacher, would have built a sermon around Miss Kilby's encroaching deafness being a compensatory blessing from God. The way her students played the piano, not hearing them was a lot more pleasant than hearing them. Of course, her failing hearing didn't do much to improve her driving.

"You were on the line!" yelled Elmer.

Unable to get past the wreck, a white car had pulled into Joe Wolff's. The driver, a male, got out as NickiLou Wolff, Joe's daughter, ran out to do her tourist-trap tricks. The timing seemed right, but I decided to let the fun go on a little longer. I didn't want to waste time and gas chasing the wrong white Escort.

"I always follow the line," Miss Kilby explained to Elmer. "The line takes precedence over the space. Remember, in the treble clef—it's the dominant one, since you play it with your right

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hand—the first flat is written on the third line. That is B, as in Every Good *Boy* Does Fine. More importantly, young man, the first sharp, F, could easily be written on the first space. F-A-C-E. It's easy to remember, because face rhymes with space. Instead, F, the first sharp, is written on the fifth line—that's *Fine*, thus showing why lines should be followed whenever possible."

Elmer spluttered—a messy response since he carried a large chaw in his cheek. That the Red Man hadn't slid down to upset his stomach proved how minor the fender bender had been. I moved upwind of him and looked toward the Escort. Once the driver had pulled into the full-service pumps, NickiLou had started giving him the full routine. She'd need a good ten minutes.

"Relax, Elmer," I said. "You won't even have to pay the deductible. I was right behind Miss Kilby. This may be the first time in your life having a cop seeing you drive saves you money instead of leading to a fine."

"That's no joke, Deputy. And I can still get around in my truck."

"And I know Miss Kilby's car will run."

Elmer said, "That ain't a car. It's a boulder with eight cylinders and four wheels."

"This isn't a Boulder," said Miss Kilby. "It's a Hudson. I was taking it to Joe Wolff for an oil change and some grease. Joe does all my work. He's such a sweet boy, even if he didn't keep up with his piano lessons."

"Let's take both cars to Joe's," I said.

Miss Kilby went to her car and got in.

"*Sweet boy?*" said Elmer. "Joe's a crook. His gas costs three cents a gallon more than anywhere else. And he does unnecessary repairs if you don't watch him."

I said, "Let the insurance companies worry this time, Elmer."

"Hey, that's right, Deputy! And Joe does do good work."

Miss Kilby started her car twice, the second time when it was running. I wondered how often Joe had to replace her starter. She and Elmer got their vehicles over to Joe Wolff's as I got the traffic moving. Technically, I should have stayed on the road to make sure everything was back to normal, but instead I cut off my light and pulled into the station, making sure I blocked the white Escort's escape route.

Joe was already out looking at the damage and calculating how much extra he could collect toward his next C.D.

I checked out NickiLou and the stranger. NickiLou was around

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eighteen or nineteen and provided ample evidence of why men like for certain women to wear tight jeans and tighter tops. If the weather had been warmer, she'd have demonstrated why those same women are traffic hazards when clad in shorts and halter. NickiLou often took five minutes just to find a dipstick and also forgot to put gas in the tank, but the tourist males and fishermen who paid Joe's inflated prices seldom objected to her cheerful incompetence.

The driver of the Escort looked as if he wanted to object, though. His hands were visible, however.

"Still keep double-ought shells around here?" I asked Joe, my voice loud enough to get everyone's attention.

"No. I switched to one of them Clint Eastwood cannons. Did you know a forty-four will bust an engine block? Just call me Dirty Joe, Deputy."

"Keep it ready. In about twenty minutes we might see a bank robber pass."

"You serious?" Joe asked me.

"He made an illegal withdrawal in Siloam Springs. I'll set up at Burial Curve—not at the state-line end, but at this end."

If the man driving the white Escort had been honest or smart, he'd have asked NickiLou to check his battery and his tires while quietly admiring her geography. Honest people don't steal. Smart crooks stay clear of banks. Even the little ones have video cameras running continuous loops and boobytrapped money. He was 5′9″ or so and exactly the kind of guy who melts into even the smallest crowd. That could explain the confused description. His stupidity became obvious when he wandered over to me.

"I seen that curve, Sheriff," he said. "A jackrabbit couldn't get through there without slowing down to a walk."

Jackrabbits come from slightly farther west—in states such as Kansas and Oklahoma. We have only cottontails.

"I'll be there ten minutes before him," I said, opening my door. "A white car with Oklahoma plates."

"You gonna block all the roads around here, Sheriff?"

"No need. He's gotta funnel through Burial Curve."

"Good luck," he said.

I pulled out of the station slowly enough that I could read his Oklahoma license plate in my rearview mirror. Then I kicked in siren and light and headed south at a high speed. Just as soon as I was around a couple of curves and well out of sight of the station, I pulled over and used my radio . . .

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You stick with a winning theory. If he'd come as far north as Joe Wolff's on numbered state roads, he didn't intend to switch to county highways designated by letters or unmarked dirt roads. So that left him one fork at which to make a choice. We'd have a roadblock in place if he chose the route west to Oklahoma. And if he kept pushing north, as I was betting, he would travel 7.3 miles before discovering two of our vehicles at the foot of steep, twisting Lanyard Hill.

I gave him ten minutes to clear the station, then headed back to it. Elmer and Joe met me with great hilarity. They had figured out who was driving the white Escort with the Oklahoma tag. Neither had run into the station to fetch the .44 Magnum, however.

"So go turn on Joe's scanner so I can hear it while I do the paperwork on this accident," I said. "NickiLou, you run next door to Shorty O'Brien's Bait Shop and get us a coupla cold six packs."

"I'm too young," NickiLou protested.

"Agreed. So be sure to tell Shorty not to let my being here scare him into obeying the law. A man could get moral whiplash changing direction that fast. Miss Kilby, what do you drink?"

"I never indulge—unless it's a small glass of sherry."

I gave NickiLou an extra $10 and wasted three minutes explaining to her that sherry is a wine, not anything flavored with cherry. Shorty found her a bottle of it. Miss Kilby proved quite capable of drinking from a paper cup. And I was still doing the paperwork when the radio started bringing us up to date. Unable to slam an Escort through a roadblock, the robber had tried to shoot it out with a pair of young deputies who had trouble missing anything bigger or slower than a flying squirrel. He was still breathing when the ambulance arrived.

"He sure turned vicious," Elmer said.

He spat into the bucket of whatever NickiLou sold as distilled water. Someone's battery was in for a different kind of charge.

"Armed and dangerous," I said. "It was in the APB. Without a backup, I couldn't risk Miss Kilby or NickiLou getting hurt."

Joe and Elmer looked at one another. Then they smiled at the two ladies. It's called gratitude.

"You're a nice boy, Deputy," said Miss Kilby. "I'll tell the sheriff that when I see him. And speaking of the sheriff, Joe, will my car be ready by Election Day?"

"Yes," Joe told her.

"That's good. I always drive to Goshen and vote for Minnie Mae Palmer. It keeps her record going. She has voted in every election

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since 1876. That was when Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky was in full flower. Surely you remember him from your recitals, Joe."

I tried to ignore the looks from Elmer, Joe, and NickiLou. "Voting for" had an illegal meaning, not a positive one, as used by Miss Kilby. Half a bottle of sherry had made her indiscreet. Just because everyone knew that the sheriff and his ticket started every election 3,000 dead voters ahead was no reason to talk about it. Miss Kilby seemed to realize that. She tottered to her car. This time she started it twice more after it was running. I considered ordering her not to drive. Then I decided that inebriation couldn't make her driving any worse.

"Who's this guy Shylacovskily or whatever?" Elmer asked Joe.

"I don't remember him," Joe said. "But I'll bet he votes straight Democrat."

TO OUR READERS

Starting with the November issue, Jon L. Breen, who wrote The Jury Box from January 1977 through October 1983, will resume the book-review column so that Allen J. Hubin can devote more time to his work as a research chemist and patent specialist.

Allen J. Hubin won a special Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for founding and editing *The Armchair Detective,* the first journal devoted to all aspects of the mystery genre. He has also reviewed mysteries for *The New York Times Book Review,* edited the annual *Best Detective Stories of the Year,* and compiled the masterwork, *Crime Fiction, 1749–1980—A Comprehensive Bibliography,* and its 1981–1985 supplement. *EQMM* has been very fortunate that he has found the time to review mystery books for The Jury Box for the past five years with such great style and perspective.

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Was that the last time your grandfather spoke to you?" Connie asked Thelma Roberts.

"No, I went back the following week for a third seance. He came again, and that's when it happened."

"What happened?"

"The Indian guide, Grey Elk, murdered him."

"You can't be serious," Connie said.

"I heard it with my own ears! Don't tell me I can't be serious! I expected more respect from the police department. . . !"

THE CRIME IN HEAVEN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"You don't seem to understand," Captain Leopold was telling the stout middle-aged woman across the desk from him. "Mrs. Roberts, this is the Violent Crimes Squad. What you want is the Swindle and Embezzlement Squad."

"What's more violent than murder?"

"We need a corpse," Leopold explained. "According to your story, the murder victim was a man who's already been dead for fifty-five years."

"But he was still murdered," Mrs. Roberts insisted. "I heard it with my own ears."

Leopold pressed a button on his intercom. "Connie, are you free? Could you come in here for a few minutes?"

When Sergeant Connie Trent entered his glass-walled cubicle, Leopold introduced her. "Connie, Thelma Roberts has a special problem that warrants some investigation. She feels it belongs with our squad. I'm not convinced of that, but maybe you could look into it

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and decide. Mrs. Roberts, could you repeat your story for Connie exactly as you told it to me?"

"Certainly." She smiled at Connie as if recognizing someone who would be sympathetic to her argument. "My grandfather was Hugh Paxton—are you familiar with the name?"

"I'm afraid—"

"No, of course not, you're much too young. Well, he was an important man in this city—a banker and alderman everyone admired. Paxton Park is named after him. I was only six when he killed himself during the Depression, but I still remember him coming to see me a few times when I was little. He had a booming voice and a big walrus moustache. When my husband died of cancer recently and I had no one to turn to, I remembered my gramps. I went to him for help."

Leopold saw Connie's mouth drop open and he hurried to explain. "Mrs. Roberts consulted a medium, Connie. A woman on West Side Avenue who goes by the name of Madame Vane."

Connie made a note on her pad. "And Madame Vane put you in contact with your grandfather?"

"That's right, on my second visit. She held a small seance and his voice came to me clear as a bell."

"Did the others hear it, too?"

"Yes, everyone did. First there was a spirit guide by the name of Grey Elk. They're often Indians, you know."

"I didn't know," Connie admitted.

"Grey Elk said he would go and find Gramps. We had to wait a long time, and even Madame Vane was beginning to lose hope but then we heard his voice, just like I remembered it. 'Hello, Thelma,' he said. It was like I was six years old again. I felt so good."

"Did you ask him about your problems?"

"Not that time. He said he couldn't talk long. But he told me to come back the following week. All week I could hardly sleep in anticipation. My friend told me he wouldn't come, but he did. The Indian guide brought him again, just like the first time. I told him about my husband dying and we talked a long time about my life and how hard it's been. I told him about the money I had and asked his advice on investments."

Connie made some more notes. "How long ago was this?"

"Three weeks ago Tuesday."

"It was the same voice as the first time?"

"Of course—it was the voice of my grandfather."

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"Was that the last time he spoke to you?"

"No, I went back the following week for a third seance. He came again, and that's when it happened."

"What happened?"

"The Indian guide, Grey Elk, murdered him."

"You can't be serious," Connie said.

"I heard it with my own ears! Don't tell me I can't be serious! I expected more respect from the police department!"

"I'm sorry," Connie said, trying to avoid Leopold's steady gaze. "Please continue. Tell me exactly what happened."

"Gramps was speaking to me, as he'd done twice before. We were talking about the small inheritance my husband had left me. Then the Indian started shouting at him. I don't know what it was about, but I distinctly heard someone say, 'Put down that gun!' Then there was the sound of a gunshot. After that there were no more voices."

"What did you do?"

"I was frantic, of course. I wanted to call the police but Madame Vane assured me they have no jurisdiction in the afterlife."

"She's quite correct," Leopold interjected.

"I insisted on returning the following Tuesday evening. She agreed and we held another seance with the same controls. Nothing happened at all."

"No voices?"

"Nothing. I returned again last night with the same result. Madame Vane refused to take my money and told me the sessions are now at an end. She seems frightened by what happened. So this morning I came to you."

Hearing her story for a second time, Leopold had no doubt of the woman's sincerity. She really believed what she had heard. "Sergeant Trent will call on Madame Vane and take a statement from her, Mrs. Roberts. You can be assured that we'll look into this."

The woman managed a weak smile. "Thank you. I hope I did the right thing in coming to you like this."

"That's what we're here for," Connie told her. "I'll be in touch with you."

But when Thelma Roberts had gone, leaving her alone with Leopold, Connie said, "Is this some sort of a joke, Captain? You can't be serious!"

"The woman is serious, Connie, and that's what matters. I tried to steer her to the bunko squad but she wouldn't hear of it. She honestly believes that her grandfather who's been dead for fifty-five

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years has been murdered in the afterlife by an Indian named Grey Elk. It looks to me as if this Madame Vane is working some sort of scam. A friendly visit from you could nip the thing in the bud."

"If you say so," Connie agreed reluctantly. "But don't expect me to come up with any bodies from the beyond."

Connie had started by checking with the bunko squad—Swindle and Embezzlement—to see if they had an arrest record for Madame Vane. She turned up only one instance, two years earlier, when the woman, whose real name was Madeline Vainy, had been arrested for grand larceny. The charges were later dismissed for lack of evidence.

Madame Vane's home on West Side Avenue was a big brown house that probably dated from the early years of the century. The other houses like it on the street had long ago been split into apartments for the young singles who'd found the area convenient to their downtown offices. This one was still together, with Madame Vane's living quarters on the second floor and the first floor given over to her business. There was no sign to indicate what the business was—only a small brass plate above the bell bearing the single word *VANE*.

Connie pressed the bell and waited.

A man in his forties who might have been a servant answered almost at once. "Good afternoon, Miss."

"I'd like to see Madame Vane."

"Do you have an appointment?"

Connie showed her badge and identification. "Police. I just want to ask some questions."

He pursed his lips and retreated a few steps, as if to remain out of her reach. "I will see if Madame is available. Please wait here."

Connie stood in the hallway as he disappeared through a large oak door. The dark wood of the staircase had been polished to a dull glow and a small Chinese lamp on a table gave off the only light that penetrated the place. She glanced around for windows, but in this area there were none.

"Step this way, please," the man said from the doorway. "Madame can give you ten minutes."

Connie followed him into a sitting room decorated in fine Victorian style. It was too bleak for her taste, but she could appreciate the quality of the decor. She sat on a straight-backed chair and after a moment Madame Vane made an impressive entrance. She was a tall, slender woman dressed in a shimmering black gown that almost

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reached the floor. Her black hair was pulled back severely into a bun and her pale face was set off by a beauty mark high on the right cheekbone.

"You wished to see me?" she asked. "Have the neighbors been complaining about my business again?"

"No, this is another matter." Connie showed her identification. "I'm Sergeant Connie Trent of the Violent Crimes Squad."

"Violent—"

"A woman named Thelma Roberts has been to see us." Connie ran quickly through the major points of Mrs. Roberts' story. "Is that what happened?"

"I do conduct seances here," the woman admitted. "I don't believe there's any law against it."

"If Mrs. Roberts is telling the truth, this whole thing seems like the first step in a scheme to defraud her somehow."

Madame Vane's pale face remained impassive. "I have not asked her for money other than my usual charge for sessions. In fact, I told her yesterday that I would no longer take her money. I want nothing more to do with the woman. She is too disruptive."

"In what way?"

"*I* have no control over what happens in my sessions. I simply summon the spirits. Some nights nothing happens. On other nights we are more fortunate. Either way, I am not responsible."

"I see. You contend that these seances are authentic, that you have no control over what the spirits say."

"How could I control that?"

"There are numerous tricks used by mediums, as you must know."

"By charlatans, not by me."

Connie could see she was getting nowhere. "Is Mrs. Roberts' account substantially accurate?"

"I couldn't say. I was in a trance the entire time."

"Have you used this spirit guide, Grey Elk, before?"

"Yes, many times."

"And since?"

"As Mrs. Roberts told you, no spirits were contacted these past two weeks."

"What do *you* think it means, Madame Vane?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you think Grey Elk killed the spirit of Thelma Roberts' grandfather?"

"No, certainly not. How can there be murder in the afterlife?

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Occasionally, messages from the beyond are scrambled in the ether, just as radio signals are. The message may have been garbled by a transmission from Earth."

"Are others present at your seances?"

"We need at least four to conduct a proper session. We sit around a table and hold hands—but I'm sure you must be aware of the traditions."

"You sit in the dark?"

"Yes."

"Were there four of you on these nights in question?"

"Yes. Mrs. Roberts, myself, Colonel Armbruster who lives next door, and Oliver. You met him when you arrived."

"Your servant?"

She smiled slightly. "No, Oliver is my husband."

"Could I speak with him?"

"Certainly. I'll go find him." She rose and went out the door.

Connie stood up and walked to the window, lifting aside the heavy draperies to look out at the street. There was little activity, and her unmarked police car sat undisturbed at the curb. She let the drape fall back in place and turned her attention to a nearby bookcase. There were a few recent novels in book-club editions and a much-thumbed volume on the history of spiritualism. A few old phonograph records in their original sleeves were on the bottom shelf and Connie bent to examine them, wondering what was keeping Madame Vane.

One of the record jackets proclaimed *Our City's Centennial—1830–1930: Its Leaders Speak*. Beneath it was a Bing Crosby record that was almost as old. Connie straightened up just as the door opened and Madame Vane returned with her husband. "I'm sorry it took me so long to find him," she explained. "I didn't realize he was outside doing yard work."

Oliver stepped forward, still maintaining the attitude of a servant. "You had some questions for me, Miss?"

"You're Madame Vane's husband?"

"That's correct."

"What is your full name?"

"Oliver Peebles."

"You took part in the seances with Mrs. Roberts."

"That's correct."

"And you heard the seeming act of violence between the spirits of Grey Elk and Hugh Paxton?"

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"It was all very garbled. I believe Mrs. Roberts may have heard more than the rest of us. I heard a noise that could have been a gunshot, but I doubt if it was."

"Have you ever heard anything like it before during a seance?"

"No," he said. "But conditions weren't good that night. There was something in the air. Bad vibrations."

Connie turned her attention to Madame Vane. "And you were in a trance during the entire time."

"That's correct."

"What about the fourth member of the seance—your neighbor, Colonel Armbruster? Could I speak with him?"

"You can if you want," Madame Vane replied. "He has an apartment next door, in the green house. He's retired and is usually at home."

"Thank you," Connie said. "I may be back later."

Oliver Peebles saw her to the door. "My wife is a bit edgy over this business," he said. "I hope it will be cleared up soon."

Connie walked next door to the green house and rang the bell for Colonel Armbruster. When no one answered, she rang a second time.

A tall grey-haired man came around from the rear yard carrying some garden tools. "You come about the apartment for rent? It's a real bargain. My tenant just moved to L.A. to be a TV star."

"No, I'm from the police," Connie explained, showing her I.D. "I'm looking for Colonel Armbruster but he doesn't answer his bell."

"Saw him at the window not ten minutes ago. I'm Charles Day, the landlord. Come on, I'll take you up to his room."

It was at the top of the stairs on the second floor. Day knocked loudly on the oak door but no one answered. "I know he didn't go out." He produced a ring of keys from his pocket. "We'll just take a look."

The first thing Connie saw through the opening door was a vase of flowers broken on the floor in a puddle of water. Beyond it, the early-afternoon sun revealed the body of a man. The landlord gasped as she hurried to him. "Is this Colonel Armbruster?"

"Yes! Is he—?"

"It looks like he was hit with that brass bookend. Yes, he's dead."

By the time Leopold arrived, the medical examiner and the police technicians had finished their work. "We're ready to remove the body," Connie told him. "I was just waiting until you had a look at it."

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"I was over the other side of town when Fletcher reached me. What's it look like?"

"Blow to the head. He died almost instantly."

"How long ago?"

"Maybe ninety minutes. I found the body nearly an hour ago."

"Any witnesses?"

"The landlord, a man named Charles Day, knew he was up here. Armbruster was retired. Day was working in the yard. He didn't see anyone go in, but there's also a back door and a front door."

"How did you happen to find the body?"

"Colonel Armbruster was one of the people at Madame Vane's seances." She went on to tell him the rest of it as Leopold studied the body from various angles and then ordered it removed.

"Let's go next door and talk to Madame Vane," he said.

She was waiting at the front door as if she'd been expecting them. Leopold recognized her at once from Connie's description. "Good afternoon, Madame Vane. I'm Captain Leopold from the Violent Crimes Squad. I don't know if you've heard about your neighbor—"

"Mr. Day told me when I saw the police cars and phoned him. It's a terrible thing. This was once such a safe neighborhood."

"Sergeant Trent tells me Colonel Armbruster took part in your seances."

"That's right. Whenever I needed someone, Colonel Armbruster could always be depended upon."

She had stepped away from the door, allowing them to enter, and Leopold let Connie lead the way. When they were seated in the parlor Connie had described to him, Leopold asked, "What determined whether you needed someone, Madame Vane?"

"Well, we always need at least four for a seance. Five or six is acceptable, but there must be four."

"Why is that? Is it a mystic number of some sort?"

She seemed embarrassed by the question. "Actually, it's the number I need to link hands around the table."

Leopold rose and walked over to a round table at one end of the room, covered with a fringed green cloth. "This table?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I examine it?" Before she could respond, he removed the cloth and ran his hand over the wood. "An old table."

"It belonged to my mother," Madame Vane told him.

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He dropped to one knee and peered under it. "They made them sturdy in those days."

Madame Vane stood up. "Is there anything else, Captain?"

"Yes, I'd like to speak with your husband. You see, the murder of John Armbruster adds a touch of reality to this entire investigation. Armbruster is certainly dead, and if he's dead perhaps Hugh Paxton is, too."

"Well, of course he's dead! I couldn't have communicated with him in the afterlife if he was still among us!"

"Is your husband available?" Leopold asked.

This time, instead of going to fetch him, Madame Vane simply called his name from the doorway. "Oliver! Come here!"

He appeared almost at once. "Can I help?" he asked quietly, squinting at Leopold and Connie.

"You took part in the seance with Colonel Armbruster the night Grey Elk shot Paxton?"

"Yes, I was present when it happened—whatever it was. I'm not prepared to describe it as a shooting. As I told the sergeant earlier, it was all very garbled. Mrs. Roberts believed she heard a gunshot, but then we all hear what we want to hear, don't we?"

"You're saying she wanted her grandfather's spirit killed? I understood she loved the man."

"That was in her childhood. Maybe now he was telling her things she didn't want to hear, things only she could understand."

"Show me where Armbruster was seated at the seances."

"Right here, between Madame Vane and Mrs. Roberts. I was across the table from him."

"So you were seated between the two women as well."

"That's the ordinary seating arrangement when there are two men and two women," Madame Vane pointed out.

"Did Colonel Armbruster have any enemies?"

"Not that we know of," Oliver answered. "He was retired from the Air Force and lived here on his pension. Everyone liked him."

"Somebody didn't," Leopold observed. "If either of you remember anything else of importance, please call the office."

Back at headquarters, Connie brought in a couple of coffees and seated herself across the desk from Leopold. He glanced up at her from the duty roster. "Is Fletcher still on that gang stabbing at the high school?"

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"Right. He's trying to get a confession out of the suspect but it's a tough one."

"How about you? Can you stay on this with me?"

"Sure."

"Any ideas?"

Connie sipped her coffee. "About which case—Paxton or Armbruster?"

"Paxton doesn't really concern us, does it?"

"Only if it was the beginning of an attempted fraud that ended with Colonel Armbruster's murder."

Leopold grinned. "You've got a theory, Connie, let's hear it."

"All right, how's this?" She hunched forward, arms on his desk. "Thelma Roberts calls on Madame Vane and tells her about Grandfather Paxton and the rest of the family—she wants to contact her grandfather for financial advice. It's a perfect opportunity for Madame Vane, who got in trouble once before with an attempted fraud. She and Oliver arrange a seance to contact Granddad in the spirit world. After a few sessions, something happens."

"Exactly! But what? Logically, Paxton's voice should have told Mrs. Roberts to invest her money in some project linked to Madame Vane or her husband. Instead, there's a shot and Grey Elk seems to have killed Paxton."

"Think about that, Captain. Why a shot? Wouldn't an Indian more likely use a dagger or an arrow—some sort of silent weapon?"

"Connie, are you trying to find logic in this? Grey Elk's probably no more an Indian than I am. In fact, his voice and Paxton's voice could be coming from the same person."

"Yes, there's the voice. Thelma Roberts swears it was the voice of her grandfather."

"A voice she hasn't heard since she was six years old."

"Still, she described it as booming. How would they even know that much?"

"She probably told them the same thing."

Connie shook her head. "No. The voice had to be almost right or it would have spoiled everything. It had to awaken memories of her childhood in Thelma Roberts."

"Are you telling me you think Paxton is still alive somewhere, over a hundred years old?"

"No—but there may be another possibility."

Connie walked over to the public library's main building a few

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blocks away. The Local History Division was on the second floor and an attractive young woman looked up from behind a microfilm reader as Connie entered. "Pardon me. Is the City Historian in?"

"I'm afraid you've missed him. We'll be closing for the day soon. Perhaps I can help you."

"I'm interested in the city's centennial celebration back in nineteen thirty."

"Oh, yes. Of course we had a sesquicentennial in nineteen eighty—"

"No, it's the earlier one I'm interested in. There was a phonograph record, I believe. Something about the voices of our leaders."

"*Our City's Centennial—Its Leaders Speak.*"

"That's the one!"

"I believe we have a copy in the file. Just a moment, please."

The young woman returned with the record, its sleeve showing the same faded illustration Connie had seen in Madame Vane's parlor. This was a long shot, she knew, but Mrs. Roberts had mentioned that her grandfather was an alderman.

"May I listen to this?" she asked.

"There's a record-player in the audio-visual department down the hall, but we're not supposed to lend these items."

Connie showed her I.D. "This may figure in a murder investigation."

"Oh! In that case—"

Connie found the record-player, set the turntable at the old 78 rpm speed, and listened. The recording was scratchy, but she made out the voice of the then city's mayor, followed by other officials. There was some band music and then more speeches. Halfway through the first side, Hugh Paxton was introduced. She listened as he read a few sentences about the city's history in his booming voice and that was it. She listened to both sides, but he did not return. But it was enough. His voice was on the record and the record was in Madame Vane's parlor.

She returned the record to the Local History Division and went back to headquarters. Leopold listened to her report with growing interest. "That's fine work, Connie," he said. "All we needed is something to link Madame Vane with that voice. I think we can show now that the messages from the beyond were faked by someone imitating Hugh Paxton."

"One of those two men? Oliver Peebles or Colonel Armbruster?"

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"Or a third person as yet undiscovered." Leopold hesitated, playing with his pencil, tapping the eraser against the desktop. "Only one thing bothers me. Why would Madame Vane leave that centennial record so openly in the bookcase?"

"It meant nothing to *me*. It's a wonder I even noticed it."

"She was gone from the room long enough for you to wander around and find it."

"She was looking for her husband. Maybe he was next door killing Colonel Armbruster."

"And maybe they were both waiting outside the door until they were sure you'd found the record."

Connie felt herself growing flushed. "That's not likely, Captain. They had no way of knowing I'd be coming there today."

"Thelma Roberts was in that room just last night, remember. Would they leave the record out where she might see it? She must have heard it as a child. Perhaps she still possesses a copy. That might be why she was so certain of hearing her grandfather's voice."

"Thelma Roberts was in a dimly lit room, totally dark during the seances themselves. And I told you it was on the bottom shelf, mixed in with several other old records."

Leopold's face relaxed into a smile. "I was only playing the devil's advocate for a moment, Connie. I think you did a fine job. Confronted with this evidence, there's a good chance Madame Vane and her husband will talk—about the attempted swindle, if not about the murders."

"Murders? You think there *were* two?"

Captain Leopold nodded. "It's a possibility."

When Leopold returned to Madame Vane's home the following morning, Connie was with him. Oliver Peebles admitted them, saying, "Madame rarely sees visitors this early."

"I think she'll see us. Mrs. Roberts will be joining us here shortly. We want your wife to conduct another seance."

"I don't think—"

"What is it, Oliver?" Madame Vane appeared at the top of the stairs. She wore a long red robe and no makeup.

"Sorry to bother you this early," Leopold said with an easy smile. "We've arranged to meet Mrs. Roberts here. We'd like to duplicate the events of that seance two weeks ago—the last time she heard her grandfather's voice."

"I'm afraid that will be impossible. I hold seances only at night."

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She'd come down the stairs to join them, standing at her husband's side. Somehow she no longer seemed to dominate him—they were simply two middle-aged people trying to make an easy dollar.

"I think you can manage," Leopold told her. "Do you mind if we have a look in the parlor?"

"At what? You saw yesterday there was nothing under the table."

But Leopold was already in the parlor, at the bookcase Connie had described, and picking up the pile of phonograph records. The centennial recording was still among them. "Do you want to explain this, Madame Vane? There's a recording of Hugh Paxton's voice here."

"Of course there is. Mrs. Roberts gave me that—so I could hear him speaking before I held the first seance. How else do you think I'd come upon a copy?"

"She gave it to you?" Leopold was dumfounded. Thelma Paxton had never mentioned such a thing. But maybe they hadn't asked her the right questions.

"That'll be Mrs. Roberts now," Connie said as the doorbell rang.

Oliver went to admit her and Thelma Roberts entered the parlor somewhat breathlessly. "I came as soon as I could," she told Leopold.

"I've suggested to Madame Vane that we hold a final seance," he said. "I think it will go a long way toward clearing the air if she can contact Grey Elk one more time. Meanwhile, though, I want to ask you about this record. Did you ever see it before?"

Thelma Roberts nodded. "I brought it with me the first time, so Madame Vane could hear his voice."

"Are you satisfied now?" Oliver asked Leopold.

"I will be as soon as we hold our seance. Mrs. Roberts will take part as she did before."

"The aura isn't right for it," Madame Vane protested weakly. "Besides, we need another man to take Colonel Armbruster's place."

"I'll sit in," Leopold told her.

"I—"

"Let's get started," he said.

She sighed and turned to her husband. "Oliver, would you make the necessary preparations?"

"Certainly." He left the room and Leopold heard him ascending the stairway.

"What preparations are those?" Leopold asked Madame Vane.

"I wear a special robe during the sessions, and these draperies must be closed to insure utter darkness."

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Oliver returned with the robe and helped his wife into it. Leopold had half expected it to be covered with stars and crescent moons, but it was a plain purple garment. If there were any hidden pockets, he couldn't detect them. The middle-aged man went about the routine of closing the drapes with great care, while his wife instructed them on the seating arrangements. "Everybody will be exactly as they were, except that Captain Leopold takes the place of the Colonel. Now please tell me exactly what you want, Captain."

"Try to make contact with Grey Elk. Ask him if Colonel Armbruster has crossed over yet. Then ask him about Paxton."

Oliver Peebles adjusted the last of the drapes. "What about this woman?" he asked, reaching for the light switch. "She can't be in the room if she's not part of the circle."

"I'll wait outside," Connie volunteered. She went out, closing the door behind her.

Oliver took his position between Madame Vane and Mrs. Roberts, across the table from Leopold. They all linked hands as Oliver turned out the lamp and plunged them into darkness. All was silence for a moment and then Madame Vane spoke. "I'm directing a message across the ages to the outer darkness. I'm seeking to speak with the spirit guide known as Grey Elk."

Leopold felt the moist palms of the two women against his own. He tried to adjust his eyes to the darkness, to see whether Madame Vane's other hand was still joined with that of her husband, but he could make out only dim shapes.

"Come to me, Grey Elk. Be my guide once more."

Silence.

Then her voice droned on in a sort of lament. "Grey Elk, Grey Elk, I appeal to you. We need you now, Grey Elk—"

More silence.

"Grey Elk—"

"Who calls?"

The voice was soft, but it seemed to fill the room, coming from all sides at once. Leopold felt the women's hands tighten in his grasp.

"Grey Elk, it is Madame Vane. Your voice is clear. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Grey Elk, we seek our old companion Colonel Armbruster. Has he passed over yet?"

"It is too soon."

"And what of Hugh Paxton, departed these many years? May we

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speak to him today? His loving granddaughter is here, waiting further word from him."

There was a clatter of some sort and Grey Elk's voice distinctly said, "*What the hell!*"

Suddenly a new voice echoed through the room. "*Police! You're under arrest for the murders of Colonel John Armbruster and the man known as Hugh Paxton!*"

It was Connie's voice. Leopold smiled and broke the circle of hands. "Turn on the lamp," he ordered Oliver Peebles. "It's over."

Madame Vane blinked in the sudden glare of light. "What happened? It's dangerous to break a trance this suddenly."

"Who was that voice?" Thelma asked.

"It's Sergeant Trent, upstairs," Leopold explained. "If Grey Elk committed a murder in the afterlife, that's where she went to arrest him."

"Grey Elk is upstairs? I don't understand this."

Connie came in then with her prisoner, handcuffed and submissive. It was Charles Day from the house next door.

"Were you surprised it was Day?" Leopold asked Connie back at headquarters when Charles Day had been booked and fingerprinted.

"Not really. When I went to interview Armbruster, Day told me he'd seen him at his window ten minutes earlier. But the medical examiner said he'd been dead a good half hour before I found the body. Day was trying to alibi himself, to set the time of death for after he was already downstairs and outside in the garden. If we dig in that garden, I think we'll find another body—the man Day killed two weeks ago at Madame Vane's house."

"Any idea who that would be?"

"I could take a guess. Charles Day told me he had an empty apartment because a tenant moved to Los Angeles to be a TV star. That meant the man was an actor, and maybe it was an actor who imitated Paxton's voice over their other-worldly intercom system. Maybe the story of the Los Angeles move was just Day's cover story for the actor's sudden disappearance."

It was still speculative grounds for an arrest, and Leopold couldn't relax until late that afternoon when Madame Vane decided to talk. Encouraged by a promise that she wouldn't be prosecuted as an accessory if she agreed to testify, she started dictating a statement to a police stenographer.

"I still believe the first killing was an accident," she told them,

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"but if Mr. Day killed the Colonel there was no excuse for it. The Colonel was a regular at our seances, and when we needed a voice for the Indian guide I asked the Colonel to ask his landlord. I paid him a hundred dollars for fifteen to twenty minutes' work and Mr. Day was happy to get it. After Mrs. Roberts brought in that recording of her grandfather, I had the idea of trying to imitate his voice, too. Day told me he had an unemployed actor as a tenant who might be happy to earn some money. I paid them each a hundred dollars a session."

"How much was Mrs. Roberts paying you?" Leopold asked.

"Five hundred for each session where there were results."

"What happened at the last one?"

"This actor—his name was Freddie Mason—had a few too many drinks and decided to liven up the session. Charles Day swears he took out a gun and was going to fire it into the air, he struggled with him, and the gun went off. Whatever happened, Mr. Mason was dead in our upstairs room and Mrs. Roberts thought it was her grandfather she had heard being killed. Oliver helped Mr. Day carry out the body, but I didn't dare have another session. When Mrs. Roberts came back for more, I simply failed to produce results. We couldn't substitute another actor's voice at that point. This morning you were so insistent we decided to risk it, with Grey Elk telling some story that would satisfy her. Oliver phoned him to come over when he went upstairs for my robe."

"The voices had to come from somewhere," Connie said. "Upstairs seemed a likely place, so I checked there first."

"What about Colonel Armbruster?" Leopold asked.

"After Mrs. Roberts was there the last time, he said he wouldn't be a party to the deception any longer. He knew Mr. Mason was dead, of course, and he threatened to go to the police. I suppose that's when Mr. Day killed him."

Later Lieutenant Fletcher looked in on Connie and Leopold. "What have you two been up to today?"

"I collared a killer," Connie announced with some pride. "And I had to go to heaven to do it."

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
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15 WORD MINIMUM
Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at 40¢ each _____
Total amount for 1 ad $

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $
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(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 months – $144.00 x .85 – $122.40)

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME _____

FIRM (NAME IN AD) _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ **STATE** _____ **ZIP** _____

PHONE: _____ **DATE:** _____

YOUR SIGNATURE _____

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

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(16) **$51.20**	(17) **$54.40**	(18) **$57.60**	(19) **$60.80**	(20) **$64.00**
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HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted. Phone # 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each. Garden City, New York 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A., 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (PO Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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13 stories—including

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EDWARD D. HOCH (about Dr. Sam Hawthorne)

PETER LOVESEY (about a mute message)

THOMAS ADCOCK (about Neil Hockaday)

JANWILLEM van de WETERING (a ghostly friendship)

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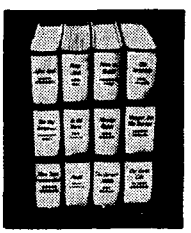

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